SPECIAL TIME EDITION

Golden Boy and 2025 Movie Star!

SpongeBob SquarePants

The Global Icon

Best Episodes

—

The Real-Life Bikini Bottom

—

Meme Master

TIME

SpongeBob SquarePants

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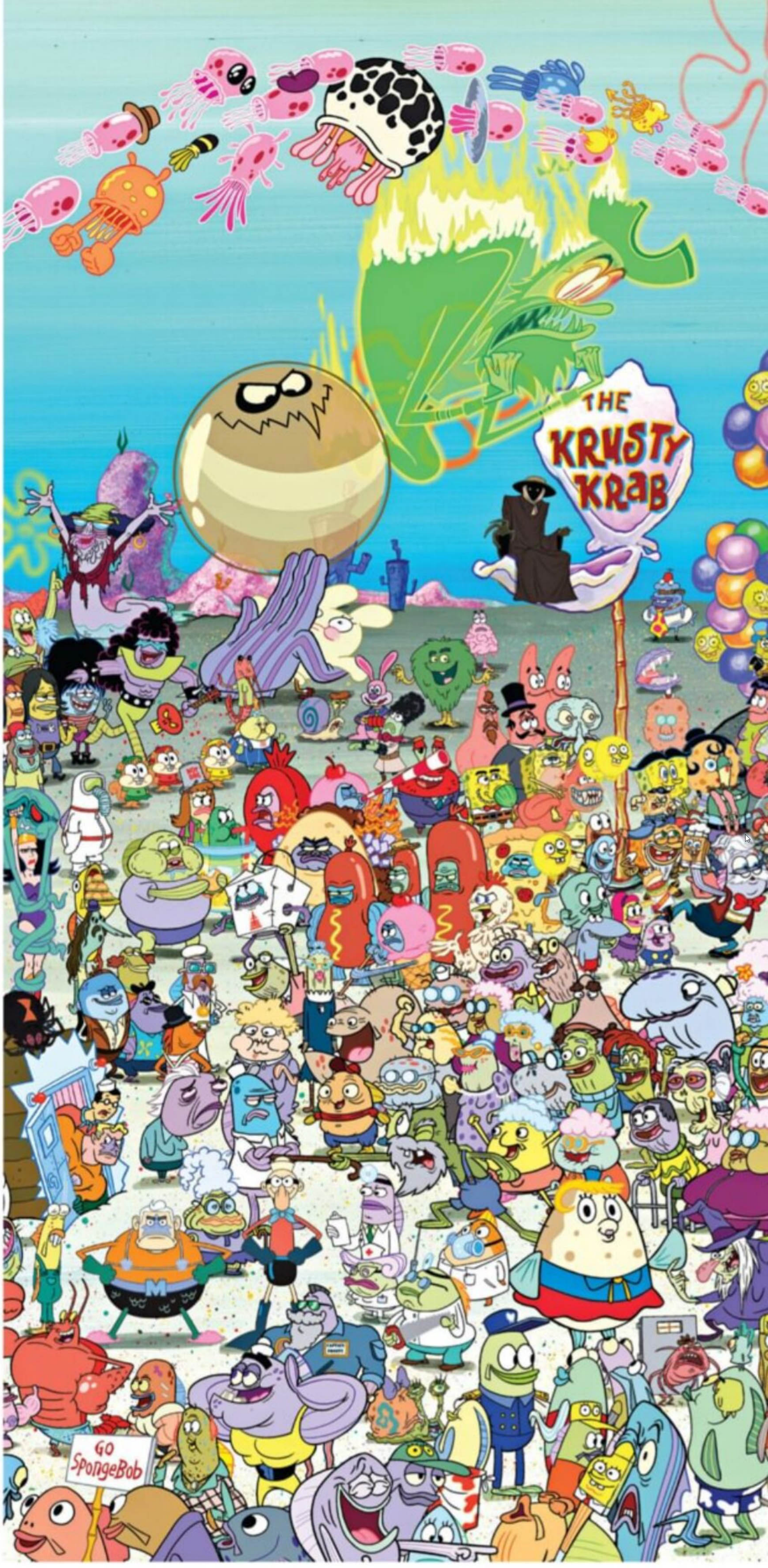


WelCoMe To BikiNi BoTTOM!

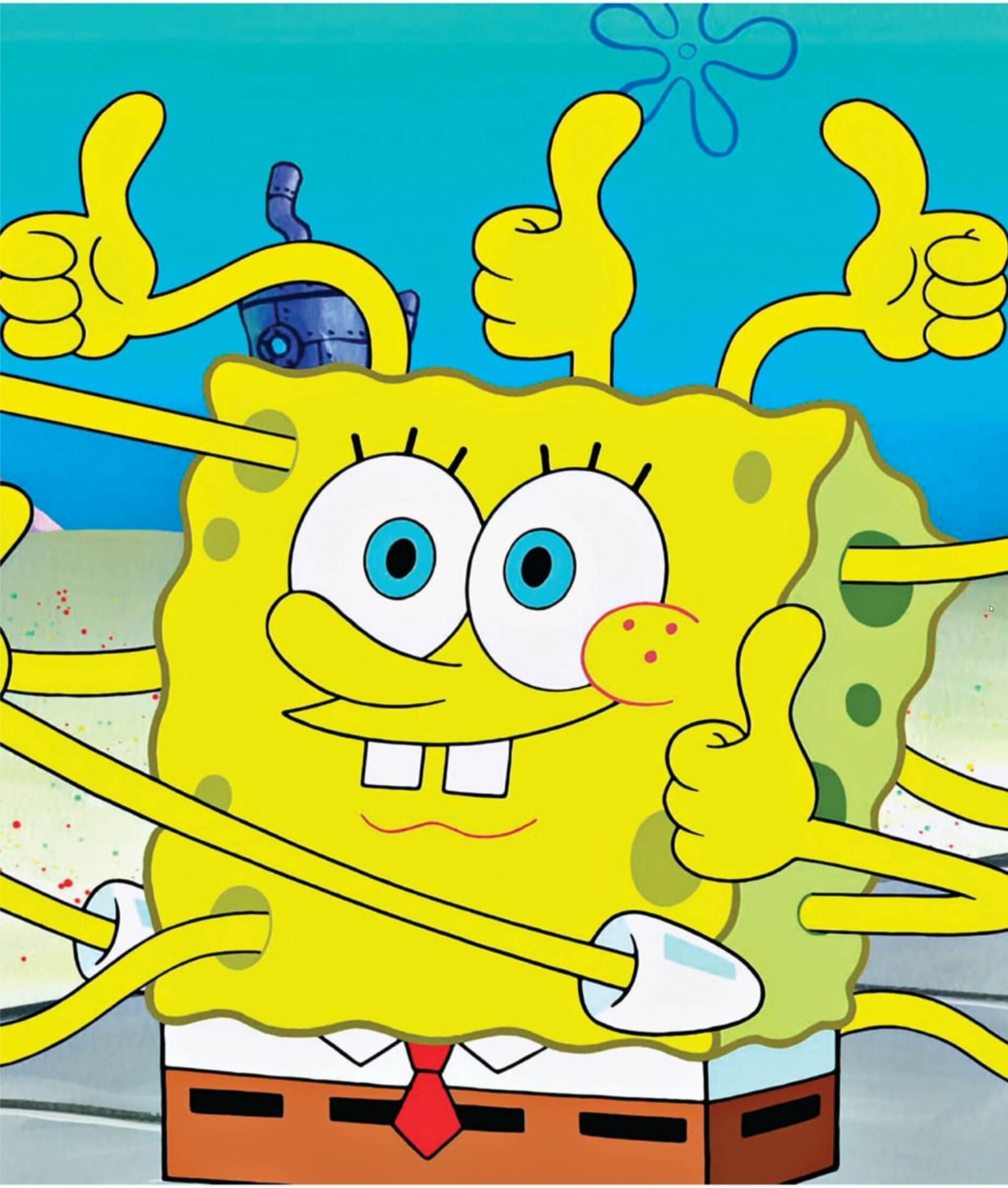
The Radical Optimist

Since his debut in 1999, the sunny-yellow and decidedly square character SpongeBob has modeled positivity, perseverance, and resilience.

BY RICH SANDS

THERE'S A MOMENT IN THE 2015 FILM *SpongeBob Movie: Sponge Out of Water* when the villainous Plankton jumps into SpongeBob's brain, hoping to finally discover the secret formula for Krabby Patties, the copepod's goal since the earliest days of Nickelodeon's *SpongeBob* TV series. Though he searches high and low, Plankton is unable to locate the formula anywhere in SpongeBob's noggin and instead stumbles onto a candy-coated wonderland of grinning, anthropomorphic foods: donuts, ice cream cones, ice pops, lollipops, and then a giant white kitten. "So much sweetness, I think I'm gonna be sick," Plankton says before fleeing.

There could not be a more spot-on scene to capture the relentlessly positive outlook that SpongeBob has had since the show about "nautical nonsense" debuted in 1999. With childlike innocence and a boundless imagination, the endearingly naive sea sponge has become one of the most popular cartoon characters in the world. For more than a quarter of a century, over the course of 300 episodes and counting, two spin-off series, five feature films, several dozen video games, and a Broadway musical,



SpongeBob has become synonymous with optimism, joy, and imagination.

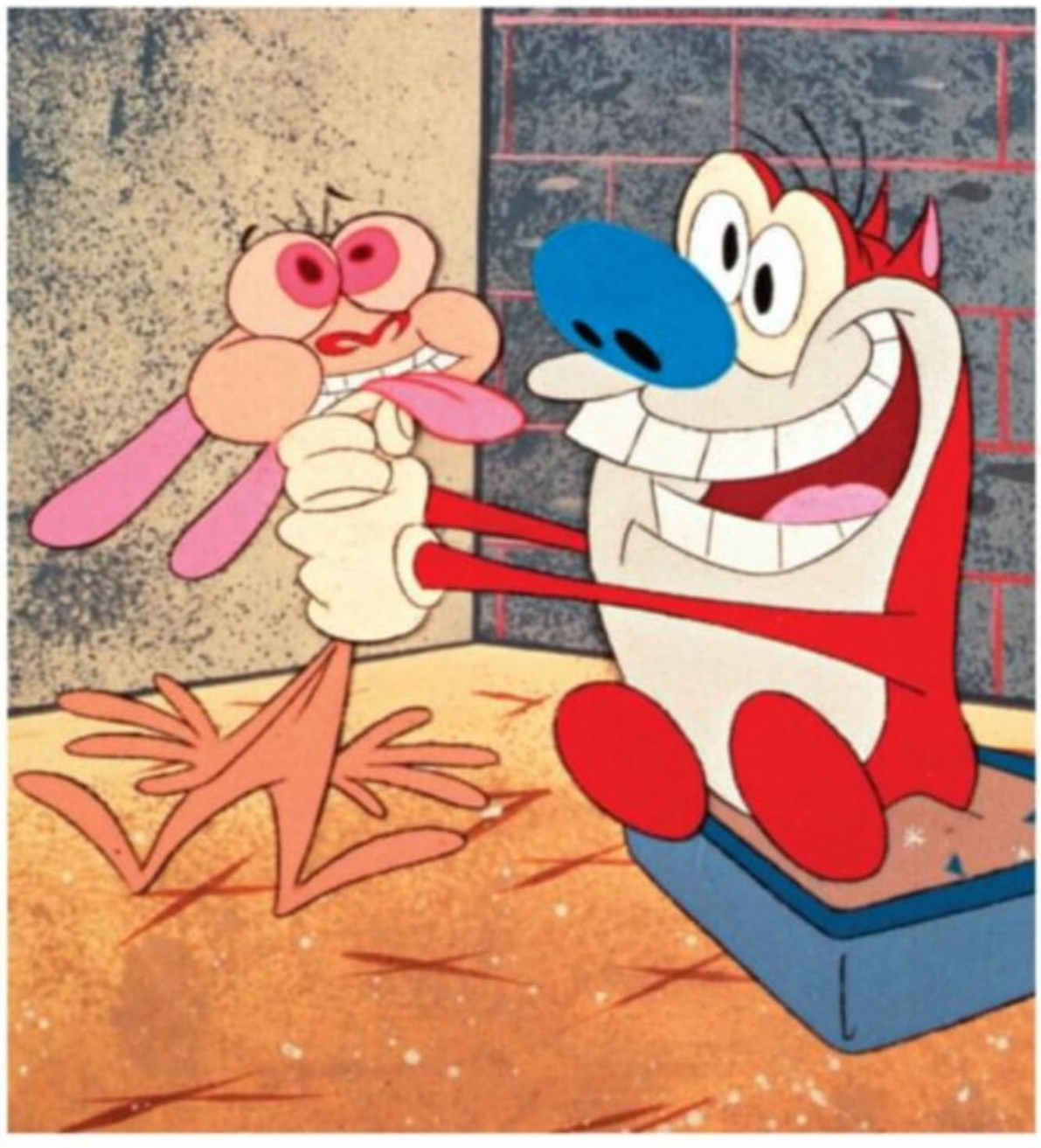
"He embodies a kind of authenticity and purity that resonates with audiences of all ages," says Ramsey Naito, the president of both Paramount Animation and Nickelodeon Animation, which produce the exploits of the bright yellow beacon of glee. "He has an unfiltered love for his friends, his world, and everything he does, and his innocence and excitement in greeting each new day with curiosity and joy reminds all of us of the kid inside."

Showcasing a character with purity and decency—and more than a dash of peculiarity—was central to the creation of the series. Stephen Hillenburg, a former marine biology teacher, developed *SpongeBob SquarePants* to marry his interests in undersea life and animation. "First of all, we want the show to be really funny," he told the *Washington Post* in 2001. "But I think in the end the message is, treat people the way you expect to be treated. And another connection to any sort of message is that a lot of the stories come out of the personal experience I and the other writers had as kids—the harsh lessons in life which are usually very funny in retrospect, like maybe what happens when you learn your first curse word and you don't know what it means."

Hillenburg—who died at age 57 in 2018 of the neurodegenerative disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS)—was influenced by the comedy of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, Jerry Lewis, and Pee-wee Herman. SpongeBob's constant shape-shifting and bouncy antics clearly harken back to those performers' trademark slapstick, physical, and outrageous humor.

This simpleminded sea sponge (who more closely resembles a kitchen sponge) lives in the underwater town of Bikini Bottom in the depths of the Pacific Ocean, where he works as an underappreciated fry cook at the Krusty Krab restaurant and spends time with his eclectic group of friends, including Patrick Star, his dim but loyal starfish buddy; Sandy Cheeks, a scientist squirrel from Texas (who survives underwater in a diving

Stephen Hillenburg's influences included Laurel and Hardy (left, top) and Pee-wee Herman (left, bottom). He didn't want to make a buddy show like Ren & Stimpy.



suit); and his beloved pet snail, Gary, who meows like a cat. There's also his greedy (and occasionally compassionate) crustacean boss, Mr. Krabs, and his long-suffering neighbor and coworker Squidward (an octopus), who is perpetually exasperated by SpongeBob's positivity. The aforementioned Plankton owns a struggling restaurant and is typically at odds with the Krusty Krab crew as he tries to steal their secret recipe.

Most episodes feature a pair of 11-minute segments, typically with farcical plots that illustrate SpongeBob's ability to find joy in even the most mundane situations. In season 1's "The Paper," SpongeBob spends an entire 11 minutes playing with Squidward's discarded gum wrapper. In season 3's "Idiot Box," SpongeBob and Patrick buy a large-screen TV for the sole purpose of having adventures inside the oversize box it comes in.

The response to the program was quick, with *SpongeBob SquarePants* becoming the No. 1 series for kids during its first season, pulling ahead of *Pokémon*. Throughout the 1990s, the animation industry had taken a more adult turn, with series like *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Beavis and Butt-Head*, but now the appeal of a genuinely happy protagonist was catching on. "Especially at the time *SpongeBob* came out, there were a lot of shows that were sarcastic, they had characters who were almost like little adults," former staff writer Derek Iversen noted in the 2009 documentary *Square Roots: The Story of SpongeBob SquarePants*. "I think *SpongeBob* was an attempt instead to make a character who's genuine and earnest. I think that's something people really connected with."

TIME critic James Poniewozik agreed, writing in 2001 that SpongeBob was "the anti–Bart Simpson, temperamentally and physically: His head is as squared-off and neat as Bart's is unruly, and he has a personality to match—conscientious, optimistic, and blind to the faults in the world and those around him. He never seems to notice that his cynical neighbor and coworker Squidward drips contempt toward everything SpongeBob does, or that his best friend Patrick Star is a certified nitwit."

According to Nickelodeon, the show is translated into 30-plus languages in roughly 180 markets around the world and is watched by more than 100 million viewers every quarter. *SpongeBob* is among

In Search for SquarePants, *Patrick and SpongeBob board the Dutchman's ship. Opposite from top, Mr. Krabs and Squidward devise a rescue plan; in the Krusty Krab.*

the longest-running animated series on television, surpassed only by *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy*. And, not surprising, *SpongeBob* has spawned a multibillion-dollar merchandise empire, including toys, clothing, jewelry, Puma sneakers, a Monopoly set, a slow cooker, and even a line of NASCAR apparel. At the Nickelodeon Hotels & Resorts in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, aficionados can stay in a villa that resembles SpongeBob's pineapple house. And in August 2025 the United States Postal Service issued a line of SpongeBob-themed postage stamps.

As uncomplicated as life in Bikini Bottom tends to be, the series hasn't been free of controversy. A 2011 study by researchers at the University of Virginia claimed that *SpongeBob*'s frenetic pace had adverse effects on the concentration and focus of preschoolers. (Producers argued that the show was aimed at viewers older than that, ages 6 to 11.) There also have been complaints from conservative interest groups that the series can be subtly political on LGBTQ+ and environmental themes. The season 2 episode "Sailor Mouth," in which SpongeBob and Patrick repeatedly (but innocently) spout a curse word (censored by being replaced with a dolphin's chirp), was targeted for encouraging profanity among children.

"Oh my gosh, if I do my job correctly, every kid in America will hate my guts, because it is fun to boo the villain, you know?"

—MARK HAMILL, ON HIS ROLE AS THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

And then, of course, there's the idea that SpongeBob might be *too* optimistic, that his cheerfulness can actually be grating. To that point, Tom Kenny—who, as the actor who has voiced the character from the show's inception, has to be considered the ultimate authority—pushes back. "He has other shades and flavors to him. He does give up, he does feel despair. And then he just pumps himself back up," says Kenny, who worked with Hillenburg on an earlier Nickel-

odeon series, *Rocko's Modern Life*. "If he was only a dewy-eyed optimist, that's pretty monochromatic. All the characters, there are those primary colors that they're made of and then there are other shadings within them that make it interesting."

One example of SpongeBob's multitude of shades is season 4's "Best Day Ever," in which SpongeBob's highly anticipated plans—a shift at the Krusty Krab, a karate session with Sandy, jellyfishing with Patrick, and then attending Squidward's clarinet recital—systematically unravel, leading to a rare temper tantrum. But when the sponge's friends point out how he actually helped them deal with their own problems over the course of the day, his upbeat mood is immediately rekindled.

Similarly, one of SpongeBob's defining characteristics is his ongoing—and unsuccessful—pursuit of a driver's license. Though he manages to earn his credentials in season 16, he realizes he's not ready, gives his license back, and keeps on trying. That indomitable spirit helps explain the show's popularity not just with the target audience of children, but also with adults, including those without kids of their own. "It all comes back to SpongeBob and having a character that is pure joy and can appeal to everybody," says Pam Brady, one of the writers of the latest movie in the franchise, *The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants*. "Kids love him, adults and stoners love him. He has a tone that is cool for all ages. He's just the greatest thing. He gives us hope. I like heroes where you can be innocent and kind and still be hilarious—and win."

Search for SquarePants will continue to add depth (pun intended) to the characters. The plot involves SpongeBob falling under the influence of the Flying Dutchman, a phantom pirate and longtime antagonist on the series, as the Dutchman tries to break free of the curse that turned him into a ghost thousands of years ago. (Star Wars veteran Mark Hamill voices the character, taking over from Brian Doyle-Murray.) The Dutchman's motives for taking SpongeBob under his wing are ignoble, and it falls to Mr. Krabs, who has a father-son connection to his employee, despite their disagreements, to come to the rescue."It was like, wow, are new wrinkles to be had in this franchise?" Tom Kenny says of his reaction to the *Search for SquarePants* plot.

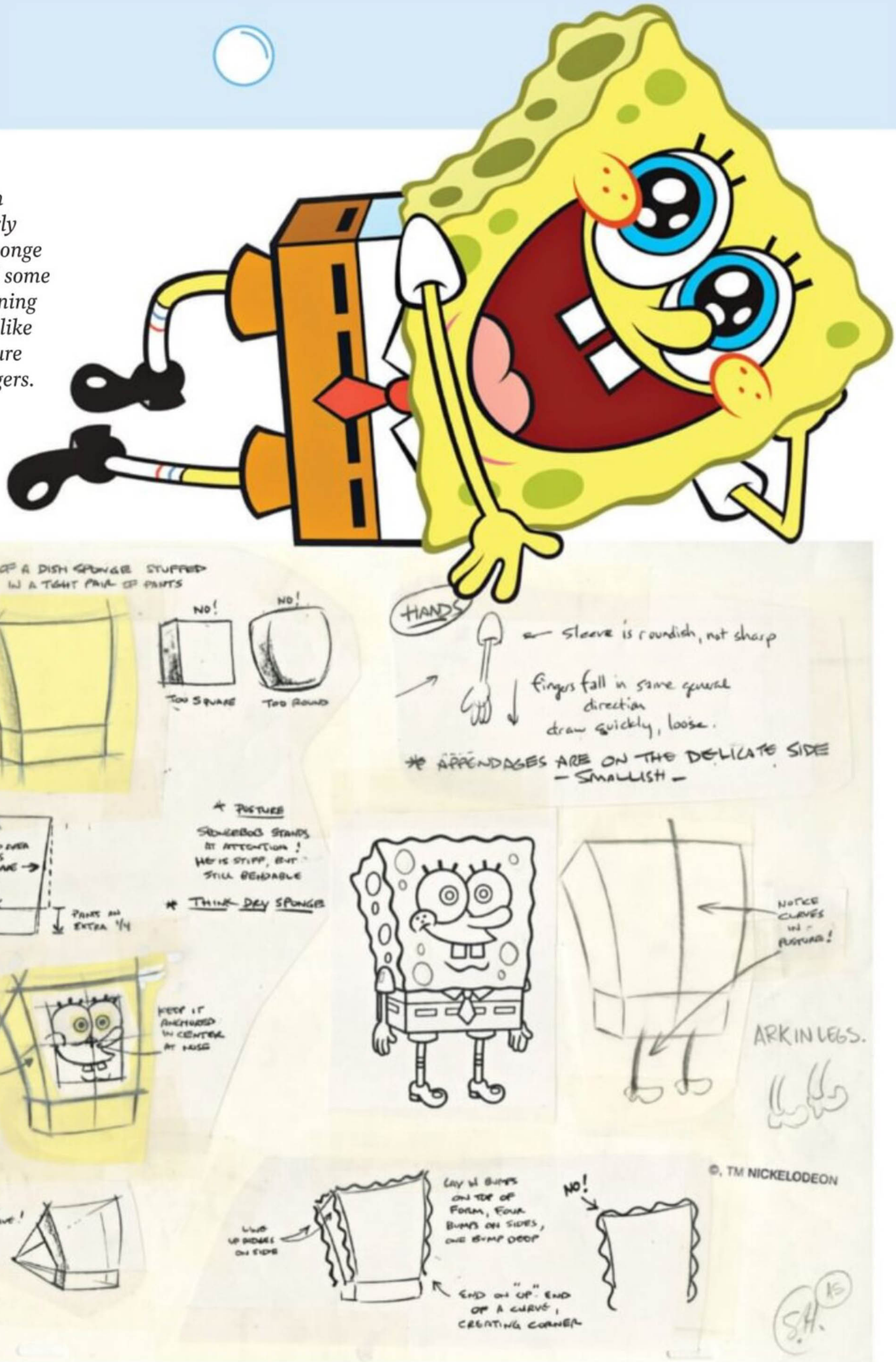
The film is directed by Derek Drymon, a former writer, storyboard artist, and creative director who collaborated closely with Hillenburg in developing the show. He left *SpongeBob* in 2008 to work on a variety of DreamWorks Animation projects and now has returned to the fold. In the early days of *SpongeBob*, the writers "always started with the idea of making each other laugh, of creating universal stories about fitting in and making friends," Drymon told Collider. "I think that's kind of the core: What does SpongeBob want? He's this innocent kid who's kind of naive, dances through life, and what he really wants to do is he wants to belong to his friends," Drymon said.

A quarter of a century into his life, SpongeBob continues to thrive off his friendships, powered by his sunny disposition and resilience. Kenny, who shares several personality traits with his animated alter ego, knows how powerful a buoyant outlook can be. "I can only speak to myself, but I am an optimistic person by nature. A lot of that is just self-survival. If I give in to despair and darkness it's over," he says with a laugh. "I always say it's easier to be a Squidward than a SpongeBob. Negativity is easy. Optimism is hard, and getting harder. But there's a lot in life that's wonderful, and SpongeBob reminds us of that."

The Bikini Bottomers

Friends, neighbors, and frenemies in the paradise under the sea.

By Emma Murphy


THINK OF A DISH SPONGE STUFFED IN A TIGHT PAIR OF PANTS
CONCAVE EDGES
KEEP BOTTOM SQUARED-OFF, SLIGHTLY ROUNDED CORNERS
NO!
TOO SQUARE
NO!
TOO ROUND
HANDS
sleeve is roundish, not sharp
fingers fall in same general direction
draw quickly, loose.
* APPENDAGES ARE ON THE DELICATE SIDE - SMALLISH -
LEAD EVER IS SQUARE
PANTS AN EXTRA 1/4
* POSTURE
SPONGEBOB STANDS AT ATTENTION! HE IS STIFF, BUT STILL BENDABLE
* THINK DRY SPONGE
NOTICE CURVES IN - FLUTING!
ARK IN LEGS.
KEEP IT ANCHORED IN CENTER AT HOSE
WATCH PROPORTION & PLACEMENT OF FACE
THINK PERSPECTIVE!
REVISED
3-22-00
3-31-00
LAY IN BUMPS ON TOP OF FORM, FOUR BUMPS ON SIDES, ONE BUMP DEEP
LAY IN BUMPS ON SIDE
NO!
END ON "UP" END OF A CURVE, CREATING CORNER
© TM NICKELODEON
S.H. 15

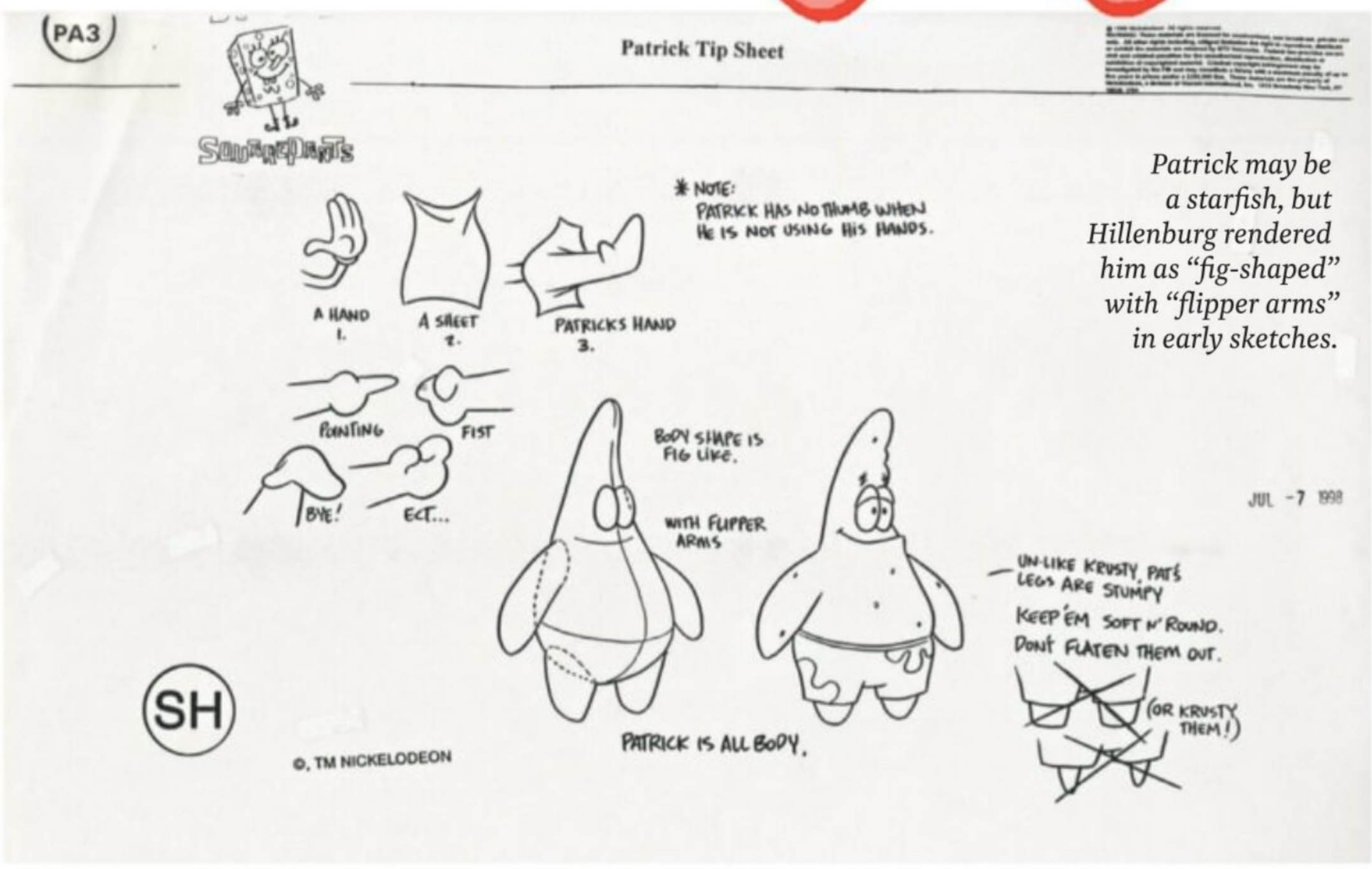
Creator Stephen Hillenburg's early drawings of "Sponge Boy" illustrated some of his star's defining characteristics, like his curved posture and aligned fingers.

SpongeBob SquarePants

Our hero is a hybrid, based on the yellow tube sea sponge, *Aplysina fistularis*, and the kitchen sponge, which accounts for his square shape. As a sponge, Bob is naturally squeaky clean and accordingly innocent, optimistic, and nerdy. When show creator Stephen Hillenburg was pitching the series concept to Nickelodeon, he captured his star's upbeat, good humor this way: "By day, he embraces each moment with enthusiasm. By night, he often lies awake so as not to miss anything either." Hillenburg noted that Sponge Boy (the character's original name) has a variety of interests, including rust, friction, and bubbles, to keep him busy; a wide circle of friends; and an abnormal attachment to his job at the "Crusty Crab" (as the restaurant was originally called), where he works as a fry cook. More than a quarter century later, our sponge is the same as ever.

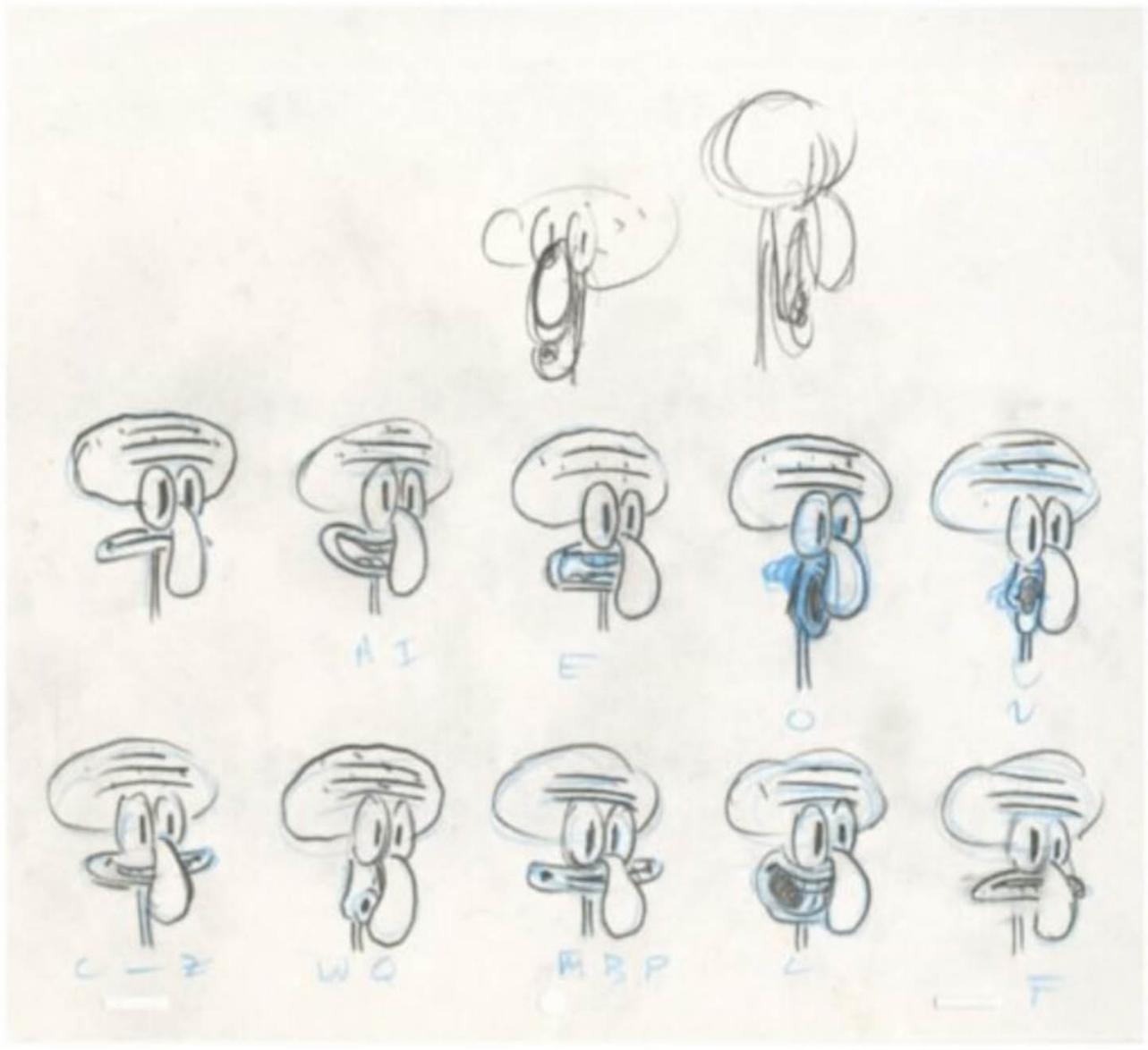
Patrick Star

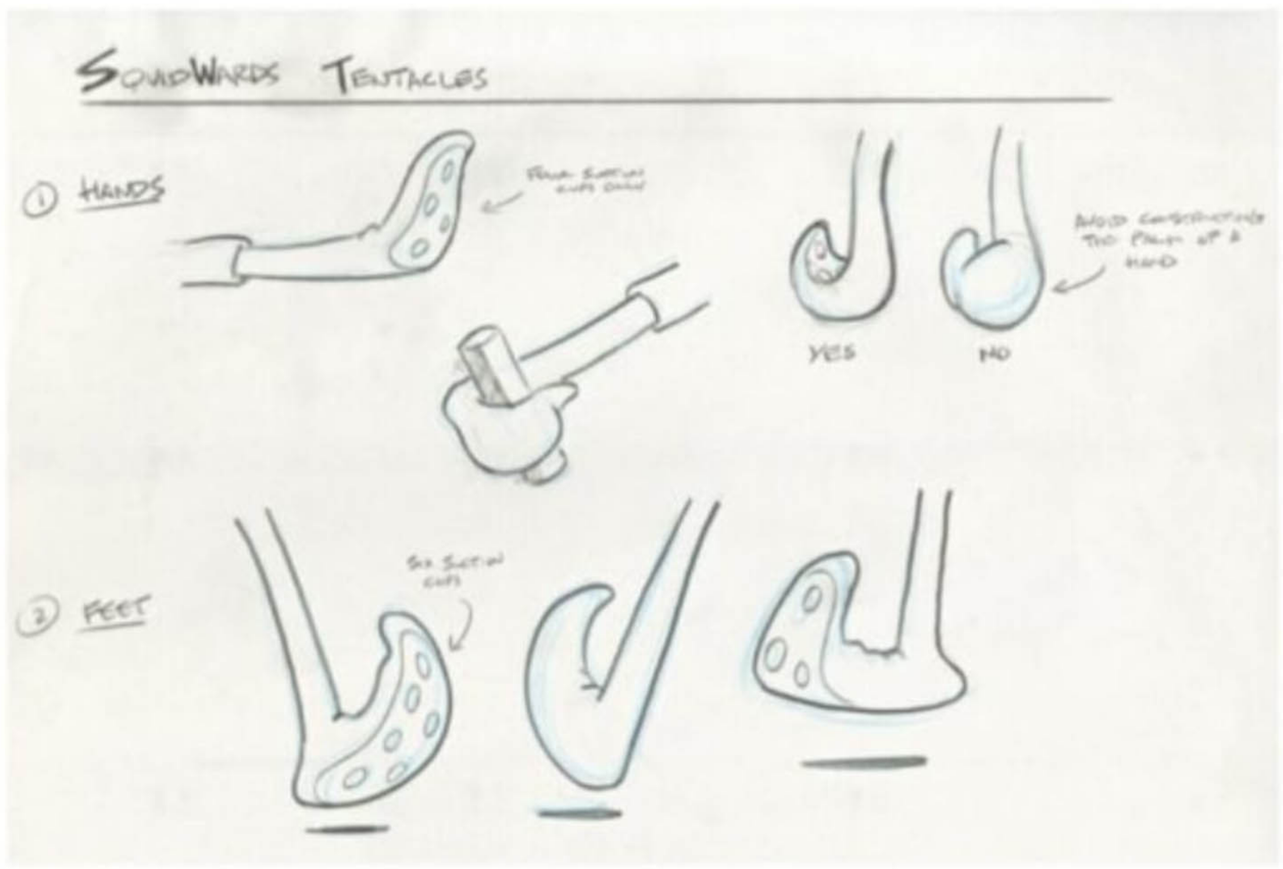
He lacks common sense, is easily distracted, and mostly prefers to sleep, eat junk food, and watch television over all other activities. But Patrick Star, SpongeBob's best friend and Bikini Bottom's most famous starfish, is also loyal, good-natured, and always dejected when SpongeBob is not around. Ask SpongeBob fans about Patrick's most endearing quality and they'll surely cite the fact that he is just plain funny. He complains he can't see his forehead, invented inflatable pants that explode, and, despite his reputation for being less than smart, can hold forth on words like *wumbo*, explaining the origin of the word, its application, and how to use it in a sentence. Among his most famous lines is "NO, THIS IS PATRICK," which the starfish yells during an episode in which he gets a job answering the phone at the Krusty Krab and gets frustrated when customers keep calling and asking if this is the Krusty Krab. Patrick has proved so popular that he has his own spin-off, a variety show he hosts from his home.



Patrick may be a starfish, but Hillenburg rendered him as "fig-shaped" with "flipper arms" in early sketches.

Like a curveball, Squidward is unexpected; Hillenburg drew him with an octopus-shaped head, based his anatomy on a squid, and gave him a name based on his Grumpy Edward personality.



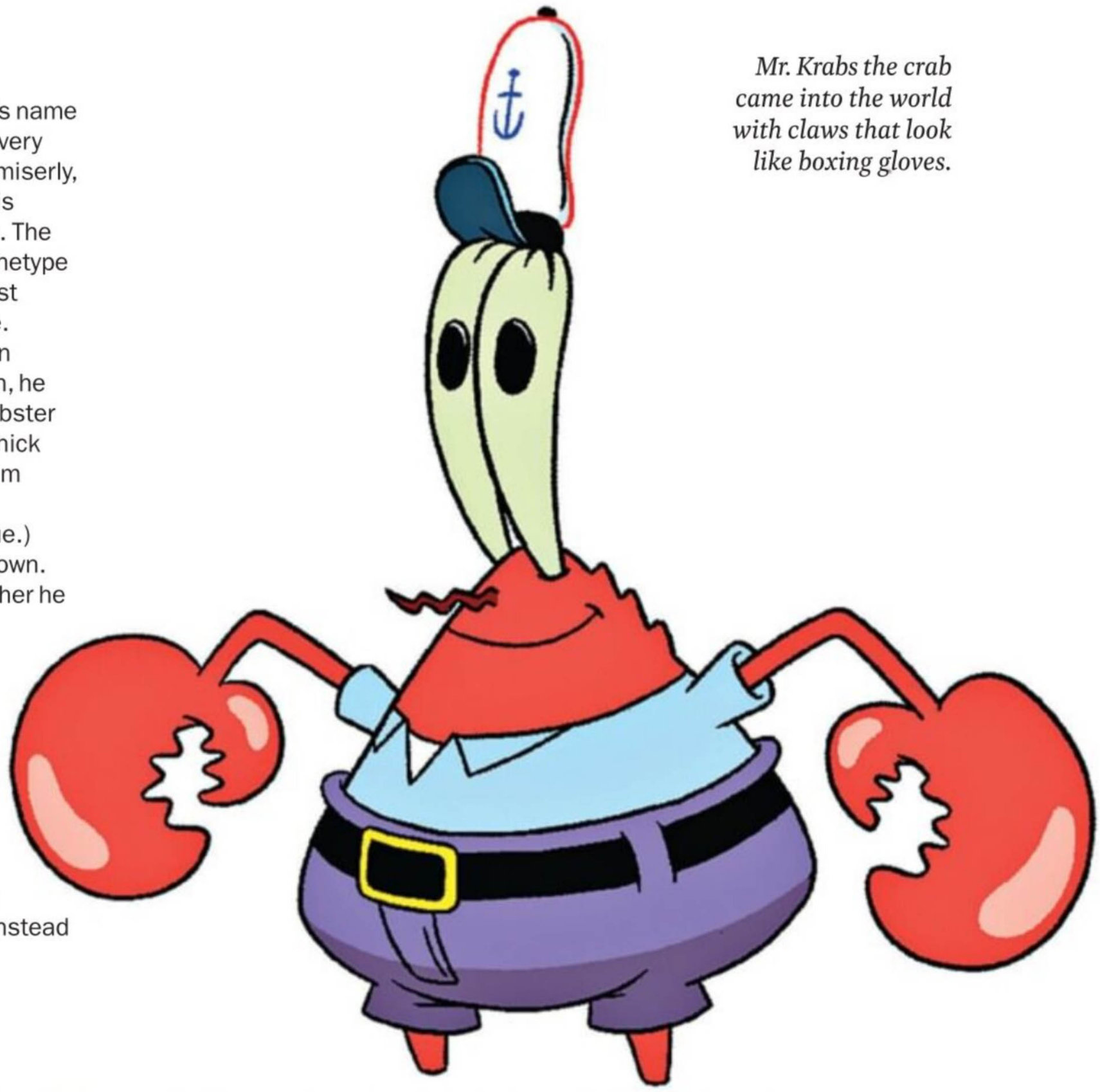


Squidward

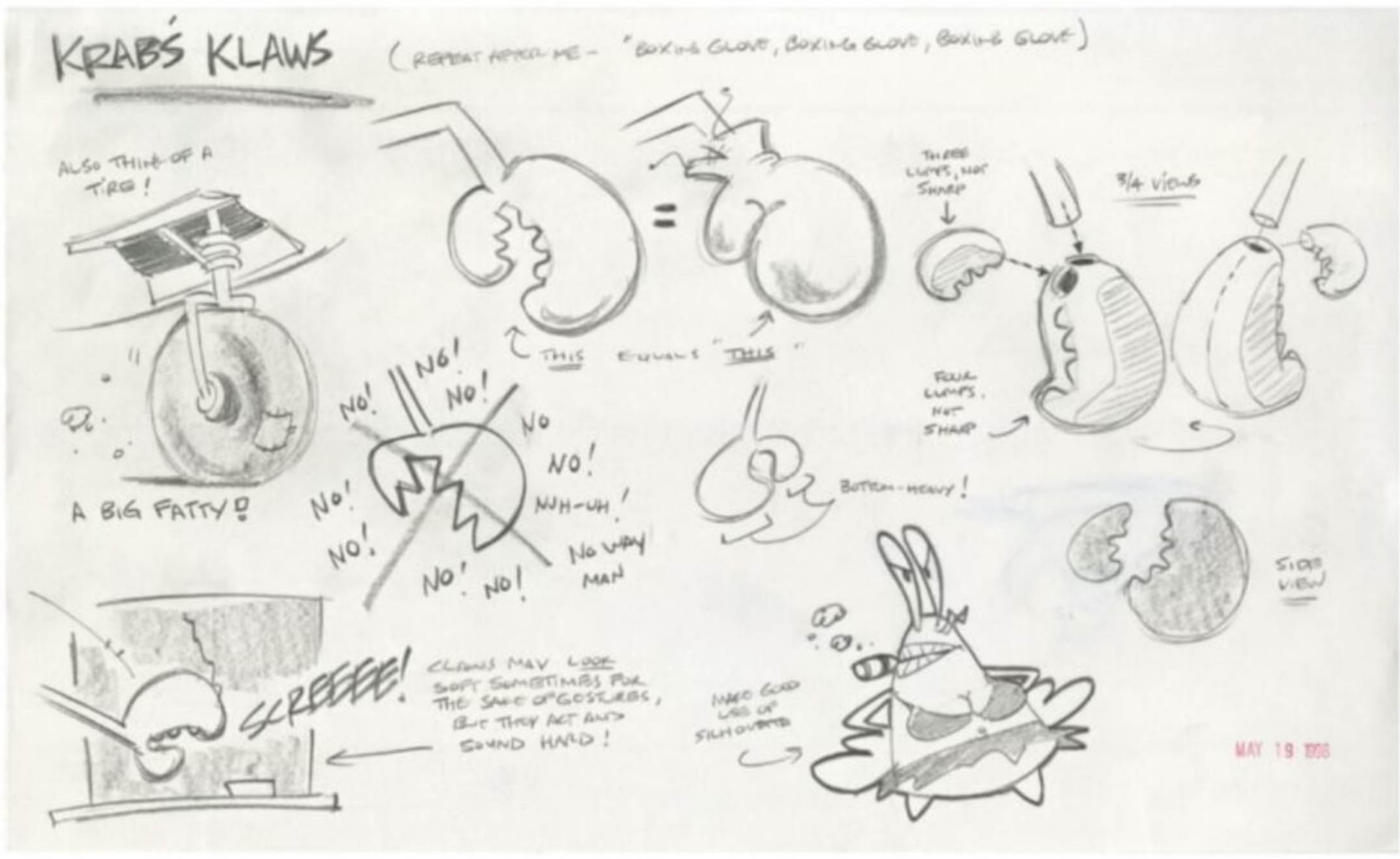
The Krusty Krab's cashier, Squidward Quincy Tentacles, has all the qualities you don't want in a coworker. He is cranky. He is condescending. He is selfish. And he has fry cook SpongeBob wrapped around his sixth tentacle. When Squidward quits his job, SpongeBob invites him to stay in his pineapple house and brings him breakfast in bed. Soon Squidward is asking for seedless lemonade and demanding that SpongeBob dress like a maid. (Thus the famous TikTok line "And why aren't you in uniform?") But Squidward has a hidden sweet side and is relatable on a number of levels. He's uninterested in his day job but passionate about hobbies like playing the clarinet; and he is insecure, an issue from his childhood, when his father, as a joke, named him Squidward, even though he is in a family of octopi. Confusing the issue further is the fact the show's animators usually depict Squidward with six limbs, not eight, as an octopus has, or ten, like a squid.

Mr. Krabs

Mr. Krabs is exactly what his name suggests: He is a crab and very crabby in addition to being miserly, in spite of the success of his restaurant, the Krusty Krab. The greedy business-owner archetype is a familiar one, and at least partially inspired by real life. When show creator Stephen Hillenburg was a young man, he worked in a New England lobster shop, and his boss had a thick Maine accent that made him sound like a pirate. (Thus, Mr. Krabs' distinctive brogue.) But Mr. Krabs' greed is his own. It's also omnipresent, whether he is devising plans to build a jellyfish-condiment factory or disappointing his daughter, Pearl, as when Mr. Krabs promises her an extravagant 16th birthday party, only to deliver a cut-rate version of everything, including hiring Squidward to cover a song by her favorite band, instead of hiring the actual band.



Mr. Krabs the crab came into the world with claws that look like boxing gloves.



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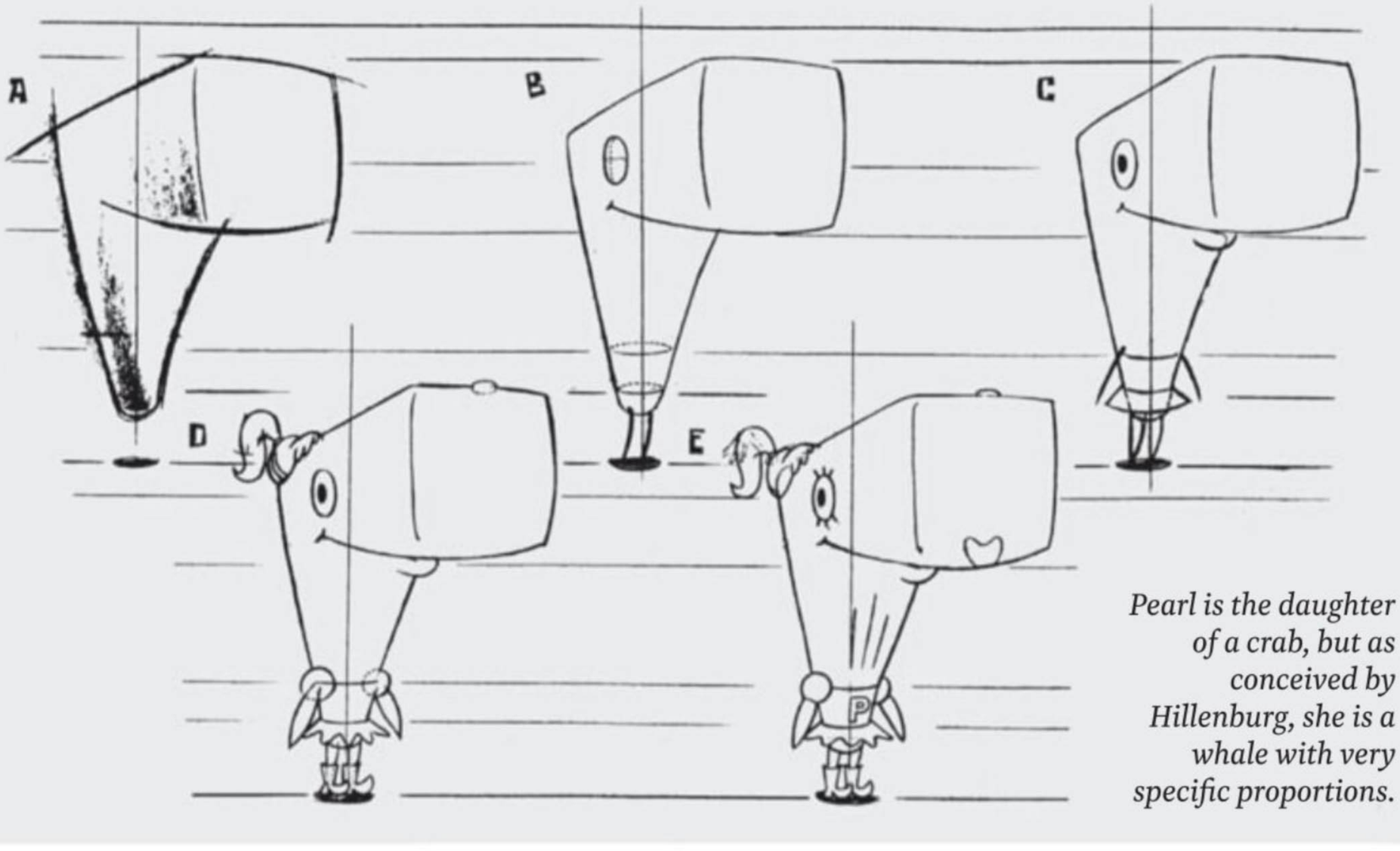
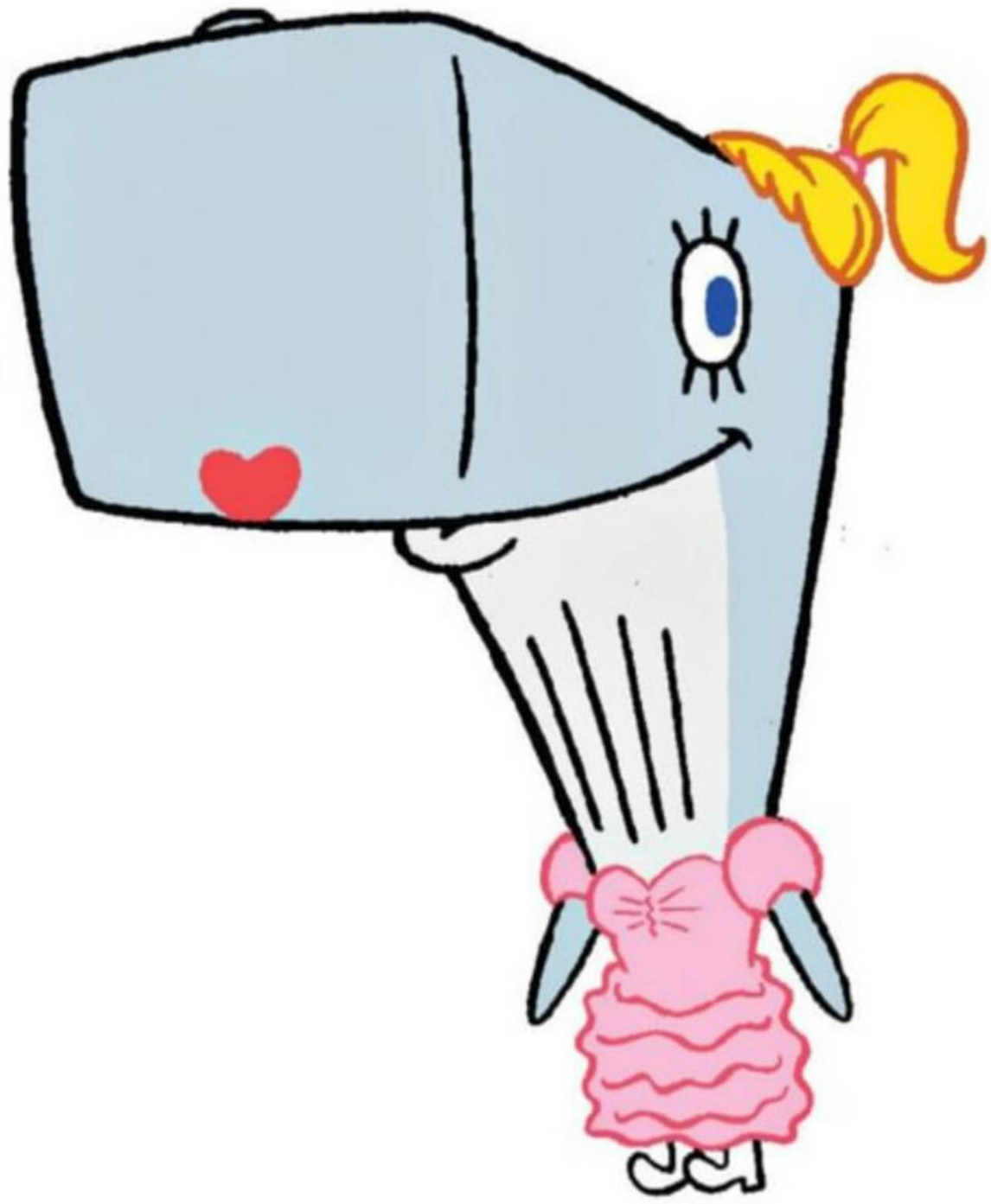
PEARL CONSTRUCTION



Pearl is the daughter of a crab, but as conceived by Hillenburg, she is a whale with very specific proportions.

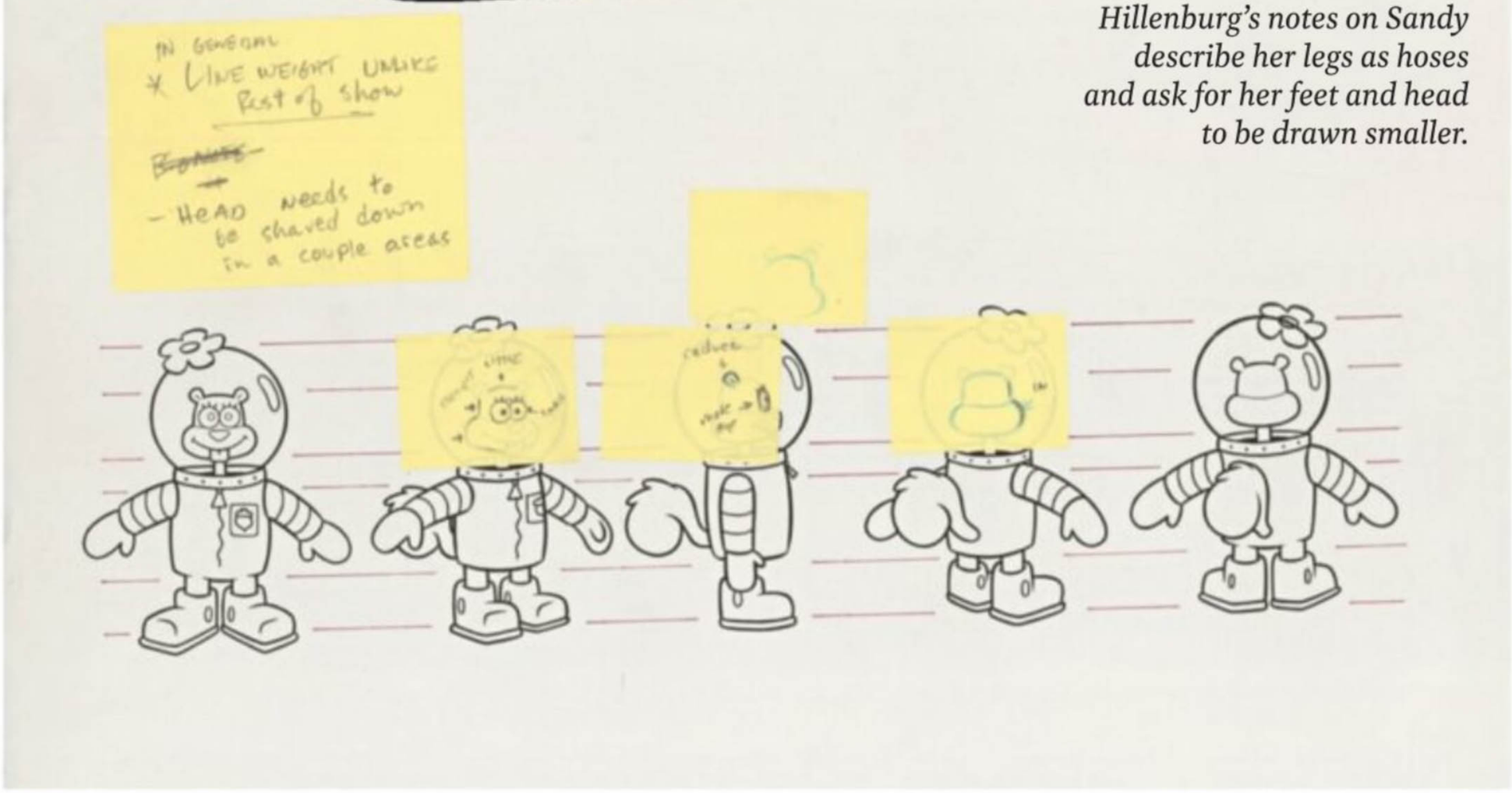
Pearl Krabs

"Thar she blows" is a phrase used by sailors when they spot a whale and by Mr. Krabs when he catches a glimpse of his daughter, Pearl—she's a whale, not a crab; go figure—about to break down in tears. The emotional teen spurts such large quantities of water when she cries that drains have been installed throughout the Krabs house. Like many in her demographic, Pearl loves a boy band and shopping at the mall; worries about her popularity in high school; and takes pride in being a cheerleader (despite the fact that her large size puts her teammates in danger). It's never explained why Pearl and her father are different species, and Pearl's mother never appears in any episodes. However, the *SpongeBob SquarePants Trivia Book* by David Fain does disclose that Pearl's mom is a whale.

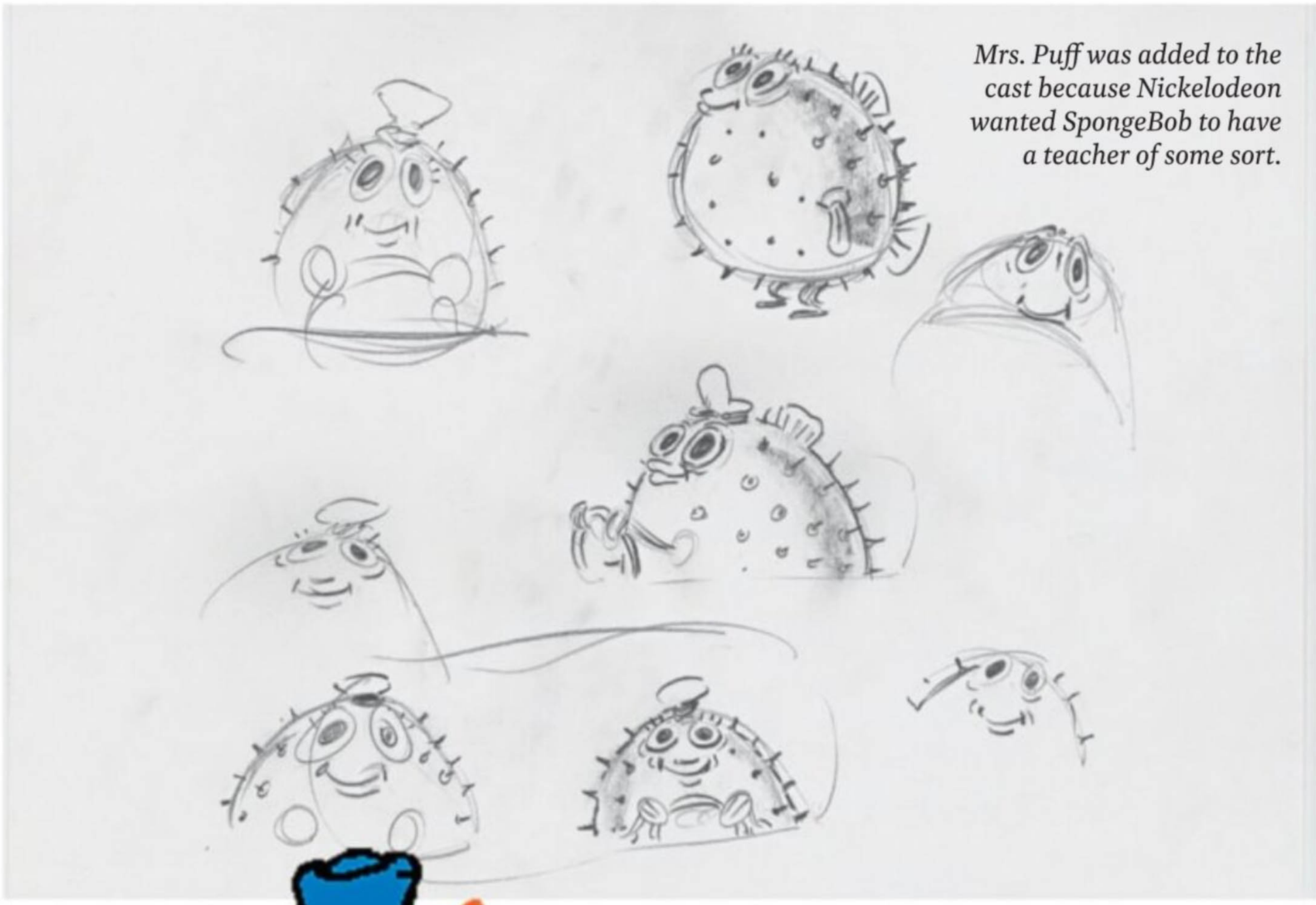


Sandy Cheeks

Even landlubbers have noted that the bubbly squirrel's name is a play on words. (Think about what happens when you sit on the sand on the beach in a wet bathing suit.) But jokes aside, Sandy Cheeks is a fairly serious character, at least in the universe of Bikini Bottom. A scientist and inventor, she's the only nonmarine animal in the show and has come to town from Texas to study sea creatures and conduct experiments. She is often shown inventing items, like the space suit she wears and the treedome that she lives in, both of which allow her to survive underwater. Unlike her pals SpongeBob and Patrick, Sandy is earnest, and she scolds them when they get on her nerves with a sassy "Don't you have to be stupid somewhere else?" In her spare time, Sandy hangs with her "Gal Pals"—Karen, Mrs. Puff, and Pearl—playing pranks on the boys and often stealing the spotlight.



Hillenburg's notes on Sandy describe her legs as hoses and ask for her feet and head to be drawn smaller.

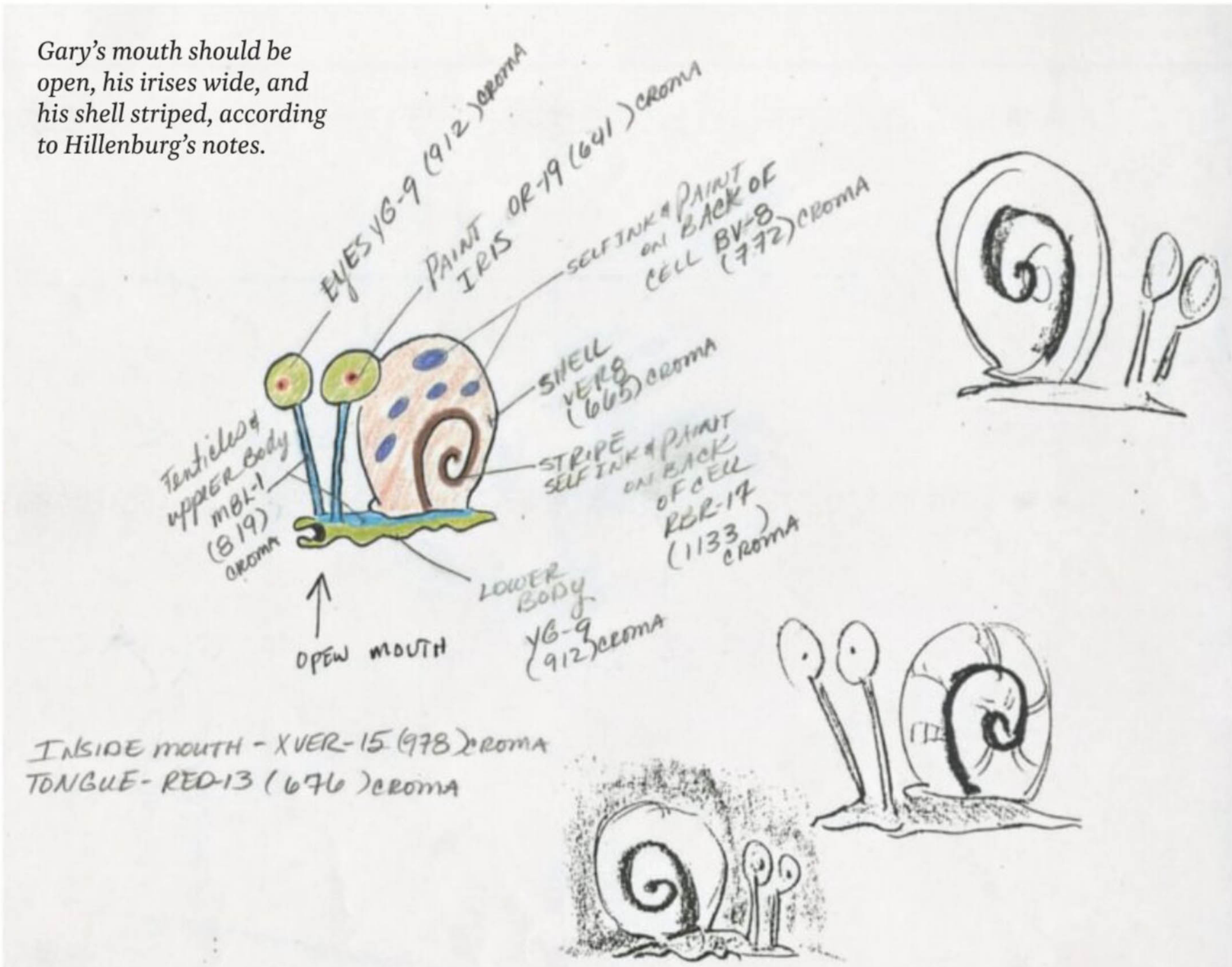


Mrs. Puff was added to the cast because Nickelodeon wanted SpongeBob to have a teacher of some sort.

Mrs. Puff

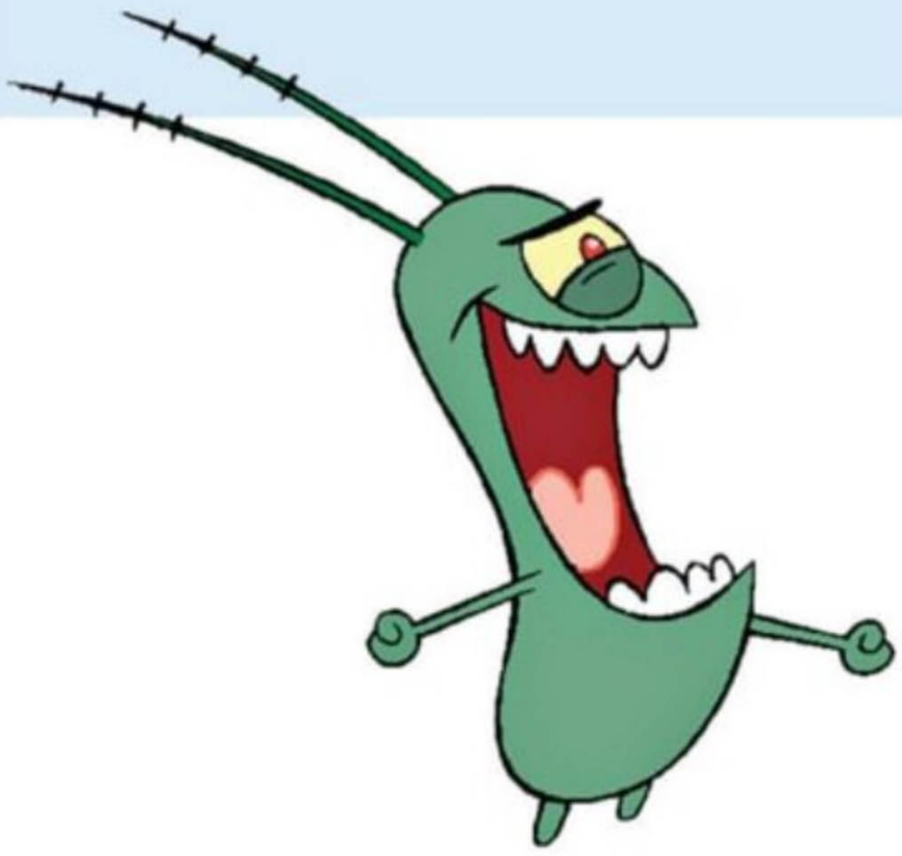
Although Nickelodeon liked Stephen Hillenburg's initial *SpongeBob* pitch, the network was hesitant to green-light a series in which the main character was not a student. So company execs and Hillenburg came up with a solution: enrolling SpongeBob in a boating school where he studied under Penelope Poppy Puff, a puffer fish and driving instructor. SpongeBob is hopeless as a pupil, and though Mrs. Puff is patient with him, his accidents take their toll on her as the seasons progress. Finally, in season 8, Mrs. Puff, pushed to her limit, enters SpongeBob in the "Demolition Derby," in which many competitors die—though not SpongeBob. She undertakes to do the job herself with a truck, but fails, and it is hinted that Mrs. Puff may have some shady shenanigans in her past. Still, she seems at home in Bikini Bottom, making friends with the women in the community and entering into a romantic relationship with Mr. Krabs.

Gary's mouth should be open, his irises wide, and his shell striped, according to Hillenburg's notes.


EYES YG-9 (912) CROMA
PAINT IRIS OR-19 (641) CROMA
SELF INK & PAINT ON BACK OF CELL BV-8 (772) CROMA
SHELL VER-8 (665) CROMA
STRIPE SELF INK & PAINT ON BACK OF CELL RER-17 (1133) CROMA
Tentacles & upper body MBL-1 (819) CROMA
LOWER BODY YG-9 (912) CROMA
OPEN MOUTH
INSIDE MOUTH - XVER-15 (978) CROMA
TONGUE - RED-13 (676) CROMA

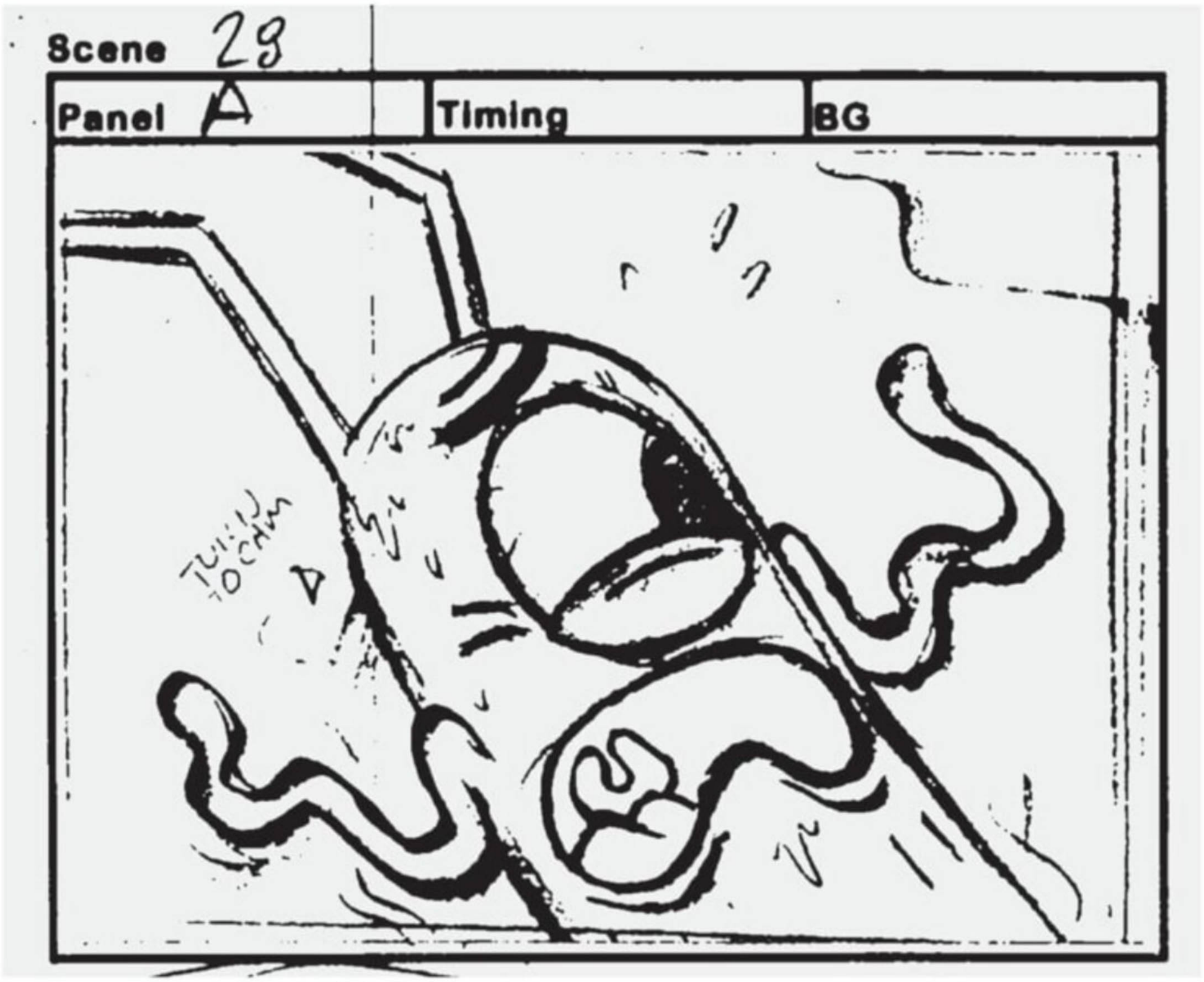
Gary

Originally intended as a background character, Gary, SpongeBob's pet snail, moved up the seafood chain after about a year on air, to give emotional support and guidance to the oft-flighty SpongeBob. The fact that the mollusk has limited communication skills doesn't seem to interfere with his rapport with his owner; he follows SpongeBob around, catlike, meowing (also occasionally barking), being moody, and sometimes attacking Squidward. The latter behavior could be connected to the fact that when Squidward babysits Gary, he sometimes forgets to feed him. Gary gets along better with his cousin Patrick. In the episode "Rule of Dumb," the two discover that they are descended from royalty, which leads to Gary being crowned king of Bikini Bottom.

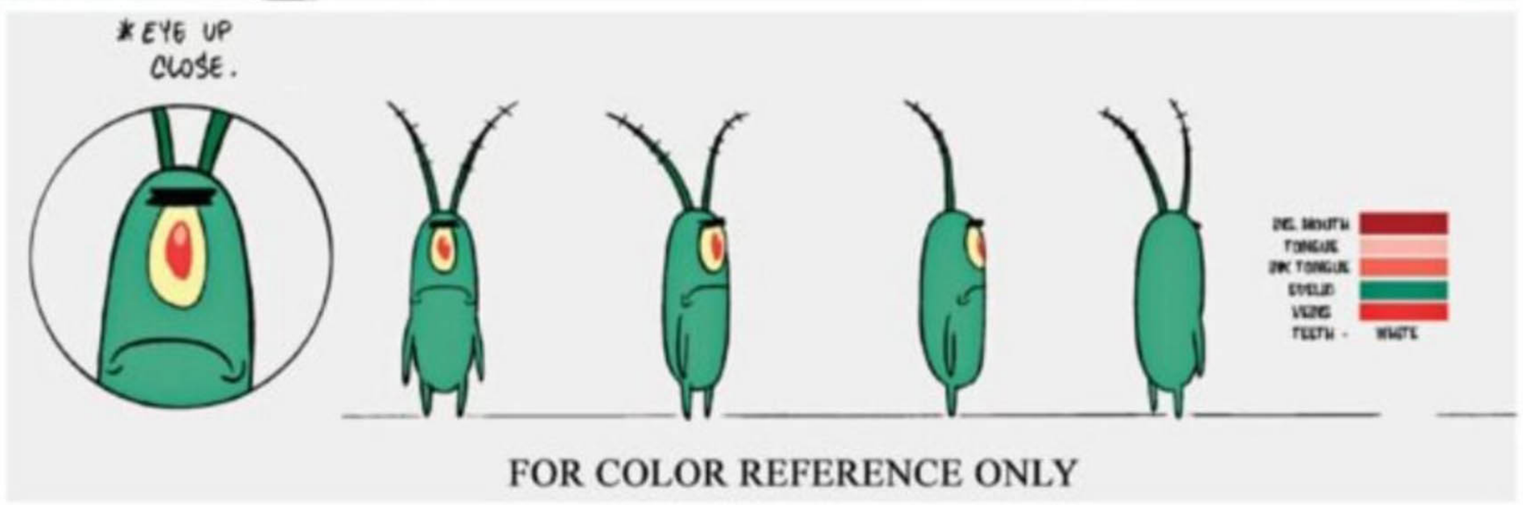


Plankton

The character the audience loves to hate, Plankton runs the Chum Bucket and is constantly trying to steal the Krusty Krab's secret formula for Krabby Patties (often with the help of his wife, Karen, a computer). The plantlike organism's bitter rivalry with Mr. Krabs is explained in "Friend or Foe," in which the audience finds out that Plankton and Mr. Krabs were once best friends but had a falling out over the Krabby Patty. The former pals each started a fast food restaurant, and the Krusty Krab became beloved, while Plankton's Chum Bucket is forever struggling. Plankton's business failure presumably explains why he is so mean and power hungry. In *The SpongeBob Squarepants Movie*, Plankton succeeds in stealing the Krabby Patty recipe but fails at his longtime dream of taking over the world.



With one central eye and two antennae, Plankton roughly approximates the zooplankton species.



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ARE YOU READY, KIDS?

Before he was SpongeBob, he was Sponge Boy, and before that, just plain Bob. The inside story of how a gap-toothed optimist sprung from the brain of a marine biologist into the world's welcoming heart.

In the Beginning

The birth and journey of SpongeBob and his crew of marine misfits.

BY CHRIS NASHAWATY

AS ORIGIN STORIES GO, THE SAGA behind the creation of *SpongeBob SquarePants* may be one of the unlikeliest in television history. It's the tale of an academic with virtually no experience in entertainment, a marine biology comic book with goofball illustrations, and a plucky, porous protagonist who lives in a pineapple under the sea. More than a quarter of a century after the show's debut on Nickelodeon, in 1999, *SpongeBob SquarePants*—and its title character—remains a giddy and beloved piece of our pop culture that's as singular as it is delightfully strange.

An instant sensation with its pint-size audience, *SpongeBob* also quickly won over the hearts and minds of the viewers' Gen X parents. Here was the rare kids' TV show that was also catnip for wised-up adults. Maybe it was the bizarro personalities—a buck-toothed talking sponge in pants and a necktie, an adorably dim starfish, a cranky and cynical octopus, and a power-hungry piece of plankton. Or perhaps it was the show's Silly Putty animation style, which seemed to nod to both classic Loony Tunes shorts and the off-kilter mayhem of *Ren & Stimpy*. Then again, it could have just been *SpongeBob SquarePants*' infectious, gather-round-the-TV-set opening ("*Are you ready, kids?? I can't hear you . . . !!*") or its playful, Hawaiian-tinged music. Whatever the case, *SpongeBob* would soon become one of the most successful

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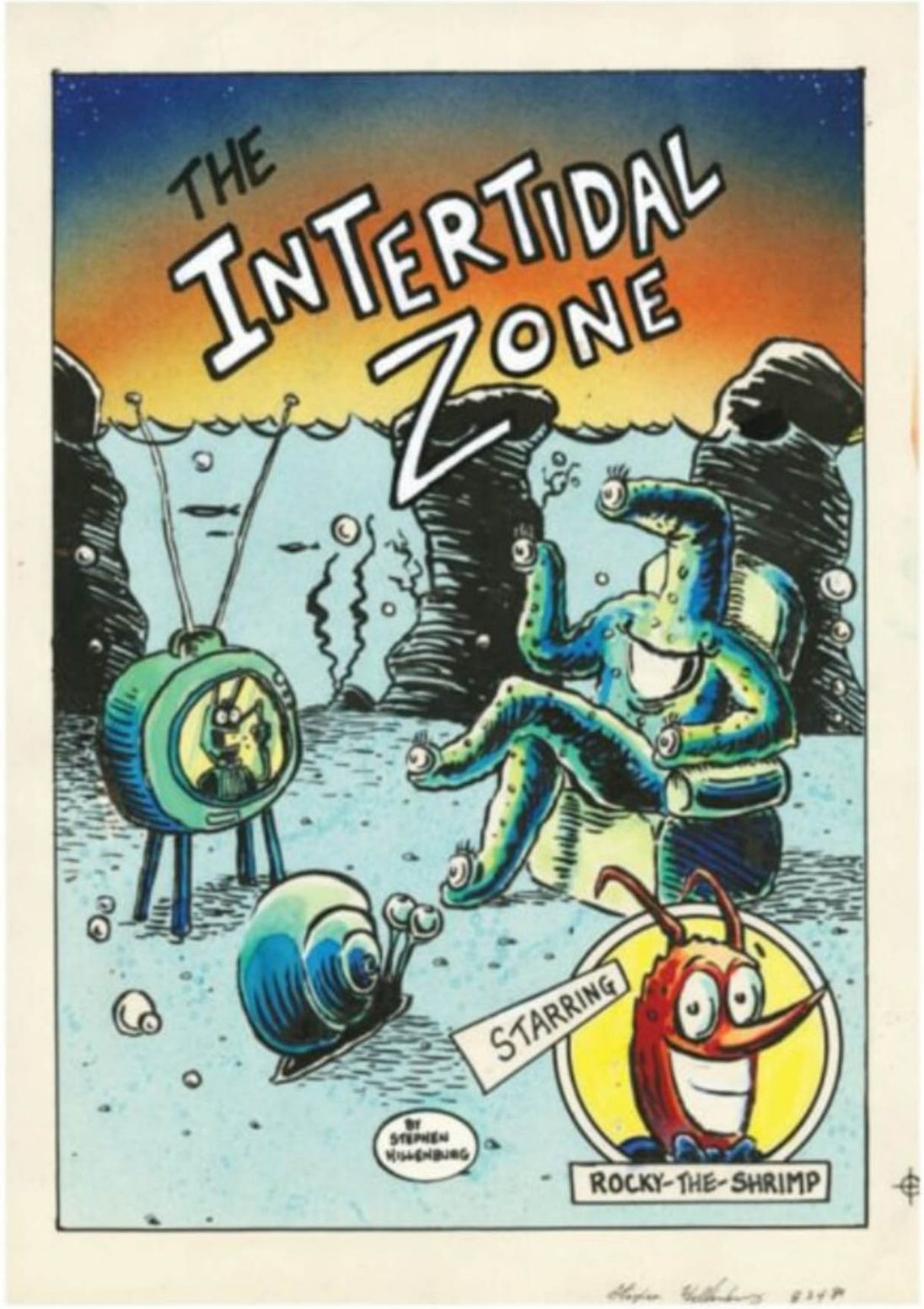


Hillenburg, opposite, in the 2009 documentary SquareRoots, *worked at the Orange County Marine Institute, where he created* The Intertidal Zone.

animated shows of all time. But you already knew all of that. What you may not be as familiar with, though, is the fluky set of circumstances that brought these iconic characters to the small screen. It's a whale of a tale.

For a lot of us, it feels like *SpongeBob* has always been a part of our lives. But, of course, that isn't the case. Our favorite talking sea sponge and his menagerie of marine-life pals spilled from the ever-pinwheeling mind of Stephen Hillenburg—a shy, soft-spoken marine biologist who, ironically, was born in . . . Oklahoma, a landlocked state. The story begins in the mid-1980s, when Hillenburg (whose family relocated to the city of Anaheim, California, a seashell's throw from the Pacific Ocean, shortly after he was born) was sharing his knowledge of the deep with field-tripping kids at the Orange County Marine Institute.

Without the helping hand of colorful teaching aids—like, say, underwater fast-food restaurants with catchy names like the Krusty Krab and the Chum Bucket—marine biology can be a pretty dry subject, especially for children who may have limited attention spans. So Hillenburg asked his supervisor if could create a kid-friendly comic book, to get his young visitors excited about soaking up deep-sea science without realizing it.

The biology teacher (who passed away at age 57 from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, ALS, in 2018) titled his stealth-education pet project *The Intertidal Zone*. Its clever hook: turning all of the quirky marine life that call tidal pools their home into colorful, anthropomorphic characters. In the comic's earliest incarnation, the marquee hero of the story was a character named Rocky-the-Shrimp, who shared the pages with such briny costars as a limpet, a sea cucumber, a barnacle, and so on. There was also a sea sponge named . . . you guessed it, Bob. It was almost as if the Saturday morning kids show that lay in Hillenburg's future was staring him squarely in the face. Only he couldn't see it. Not yet, at least.

Bob wasn't quite recognizable as SpongeBob at this early stage of project. But as Hillenburg contin-

ued to toil away on his "science adventure comic" and fine-tune the cast of characters, Bob the sponge began to take on now familiar characteristics—his all-right-angles shape, his resemblance to an everyday household kitchen object, his open-mouthed grin. (For the record, the *Intertidal Zone*'s supporting starfish character looks absolutely *nothing* like Patrick.) The *Intertidal Zone*'s slim, 15-page package also managed to sprinkle in a few daffy detours under the heading "Amazing Facts," aimed directly at Hillenburg's elementary-school students. Like a parent sneaking kale into a strawberry smoothie, Hillenburg was spoon-feeding kids educational factoids in the guise of fun.

Inspired, Hillenburg tried to get *The Intertidal Zone* published, but New York editors were uninterested in a young marine biologist with literary ambitions. In most book-industry tales, that's where the life of a half-baked character like SpongeBob would have ended, doomed to gathering dust at the bottom of a desk drawer. Instead, Hillenburg pivoted, putting his marine biology studies—and his day job at the Marine Institute—on hold and applying to the California Institute of the Arts' Experimental Animation program, the same artistic hothouse that had churned out such idiosyncratic talents as Tim Burton (*Pee-wee's Big Adventure*), Brad Bird (*Ratatouille*), John Lasseter (*Toy Story*), Pete Docter (*Monsters, Inc.*), and Henry Selick (*Coraline*). Hillenburg didn't realize it at the time, but he was on his way to making TV history.

While New York publishing execs didn't recognize Hillenburg's talents, his future CalArts professors did. To them, *The Intertidal Zone* was both promising enough and off-kilter enough to earn him a place in the program. CalArts was the sort of place where a sponge-drawing square peg fit in perfectly.

Once enrolled, Hillenburg began working on various short films, including 1991's *The Green Beret* (about a girl with massive hands who levels entire neighborhoods while trying to peddle Girl Scout cookies) and 1992's *Wormholes* (a cartoon meditation on the theory of relativity). The latter snagged Hillenburg a grant, which he used to complete the film and take it on the road to animation festivals. *New York Times* movie critic Manohla Dargis singled out Hillenburg and *Wormholes* for praise.

At the Ottawa International Animation Festival, Hillenburg met veteran animator and illustrator Joe Murray, who would later give the CalArts student

his big break. At the time, Murray was working on a new animated show, *Rocko's Modern Life*, that he'd pitched to Nickelodeon—and was looking for talent to help bring the series to life. After screening *Wormholes*, Murray thought Hillenburg had the exact sensibility he was looking for.

Rocko's Modern Life, which ultimately ran on the network from 1993 to 1996, told the story of an Australian wallaby who, along with his eccentric animal pals, hops his way into unlikely situations.

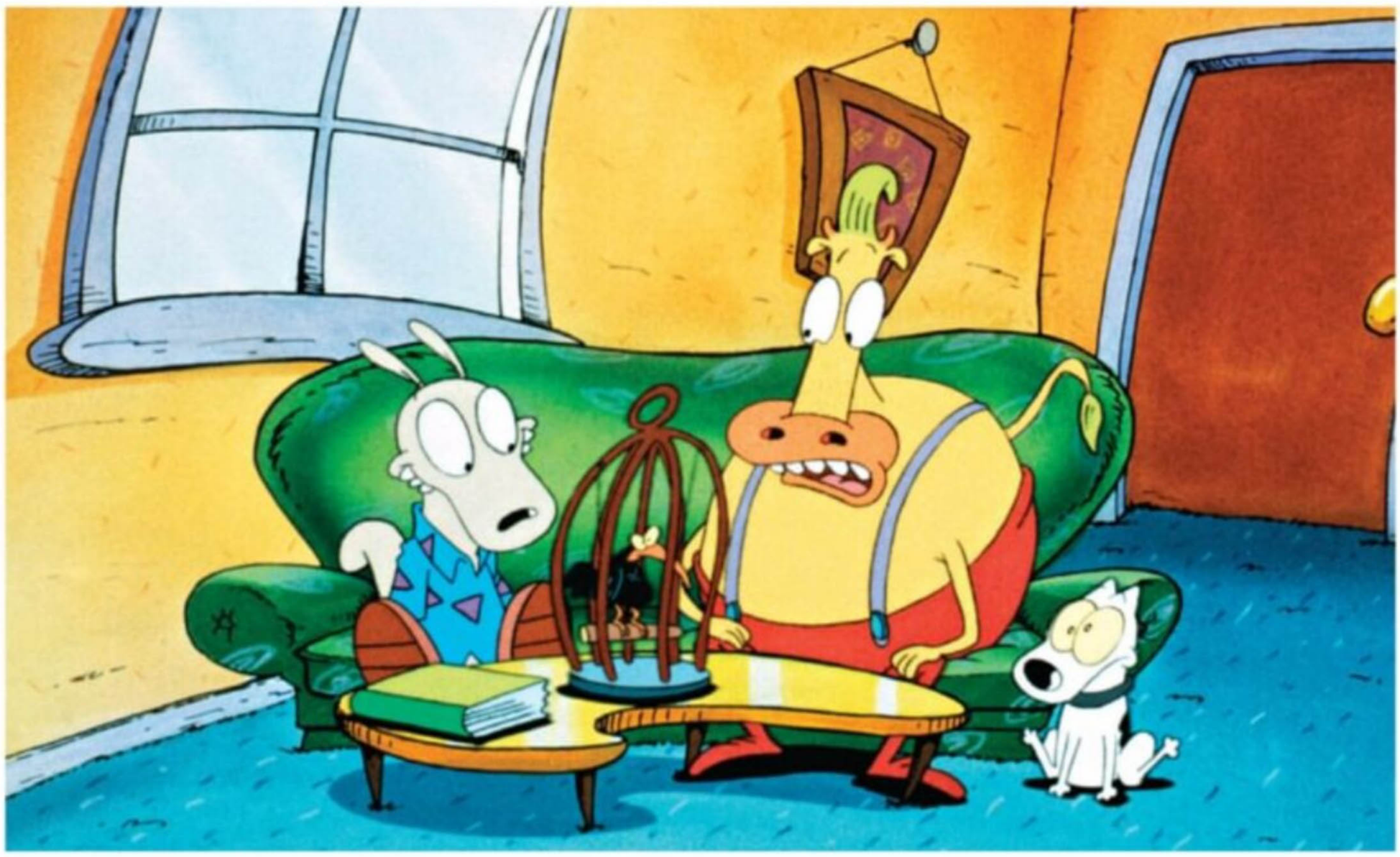
During the show's four-season run, Hillenburg both impressed his colleagues and became one of Murray's top lieutenants, entrusted with directing episodes, as well as acting as a producer, writer, storyboard artist, executive story editor, and finally the show's creative director. But when Nickelodeon didn't renew the show for a fifth season, Hillenburg found himself out of work again.

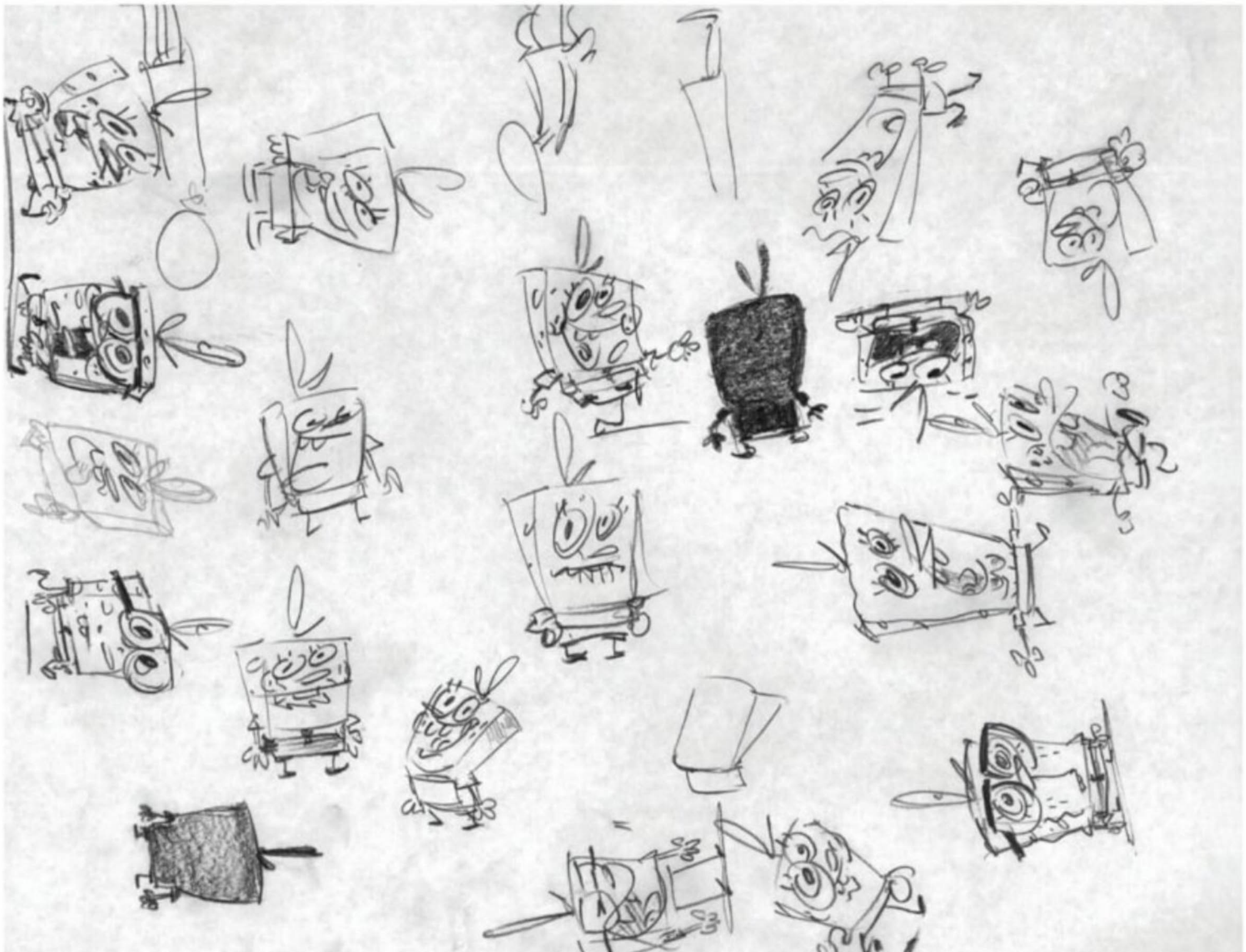
Considering what to do next, Hillenburg recalled some advice from another writer on *Rocko's Modern Life*, Martin Olson, to whom Hillenburg had shown issues of *The Intertidal Zone*. Instead of dismissing the comics with a simple "Nice work," Olson suggested that Hillenburg develop the concept into a television show. It was the exact boost Hillenburg needed to hear, one that allowed him to combine his interest in animation with his classroom experience teaching marine biology. "For all those years it seemed like I was doing these two totally separate things," Hillenburg said in 2002. "I wondered what it all meant. I didn't see a synthesis. It was great when [my two interests] all came together [in a show]."

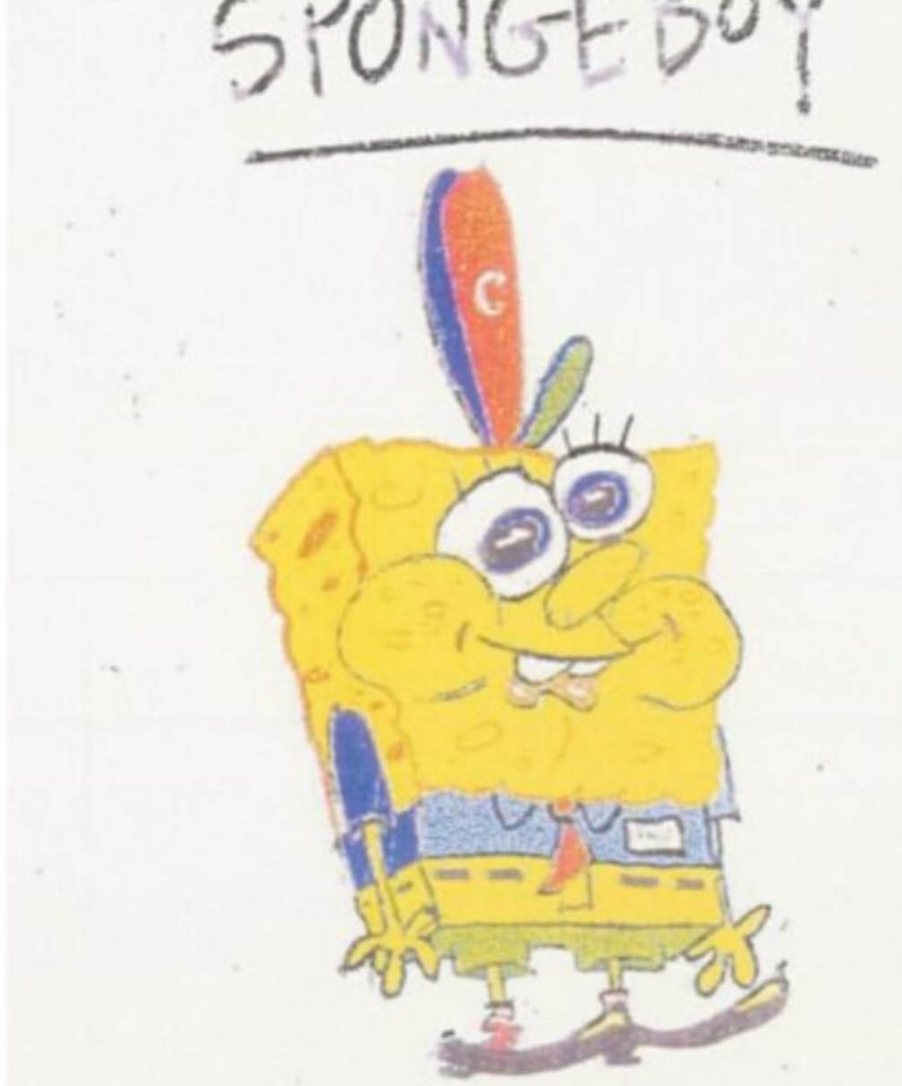
Hillenburg began to tease out a story about "a small town underwater where the characters were more like us than like fish," he recalled later. "They have fire. They take walks. They drive. They have pets and holidays." Needing a main character, he began toying with a personality he at first called Sponge Boy, drawing inspiration from famously naive characters like Charlie Chaplin. "I wanted to do a show about a character that was an innocent, and so I focused on a sea sponge because it's a funny animal, a strange one."

Hillenburg made this Sponge Boy into a perfect square to match his "square" personality, and turned to an actor from *Rocko's Modern Life*—the rubber-voiced comedian Tom Kenny, to add

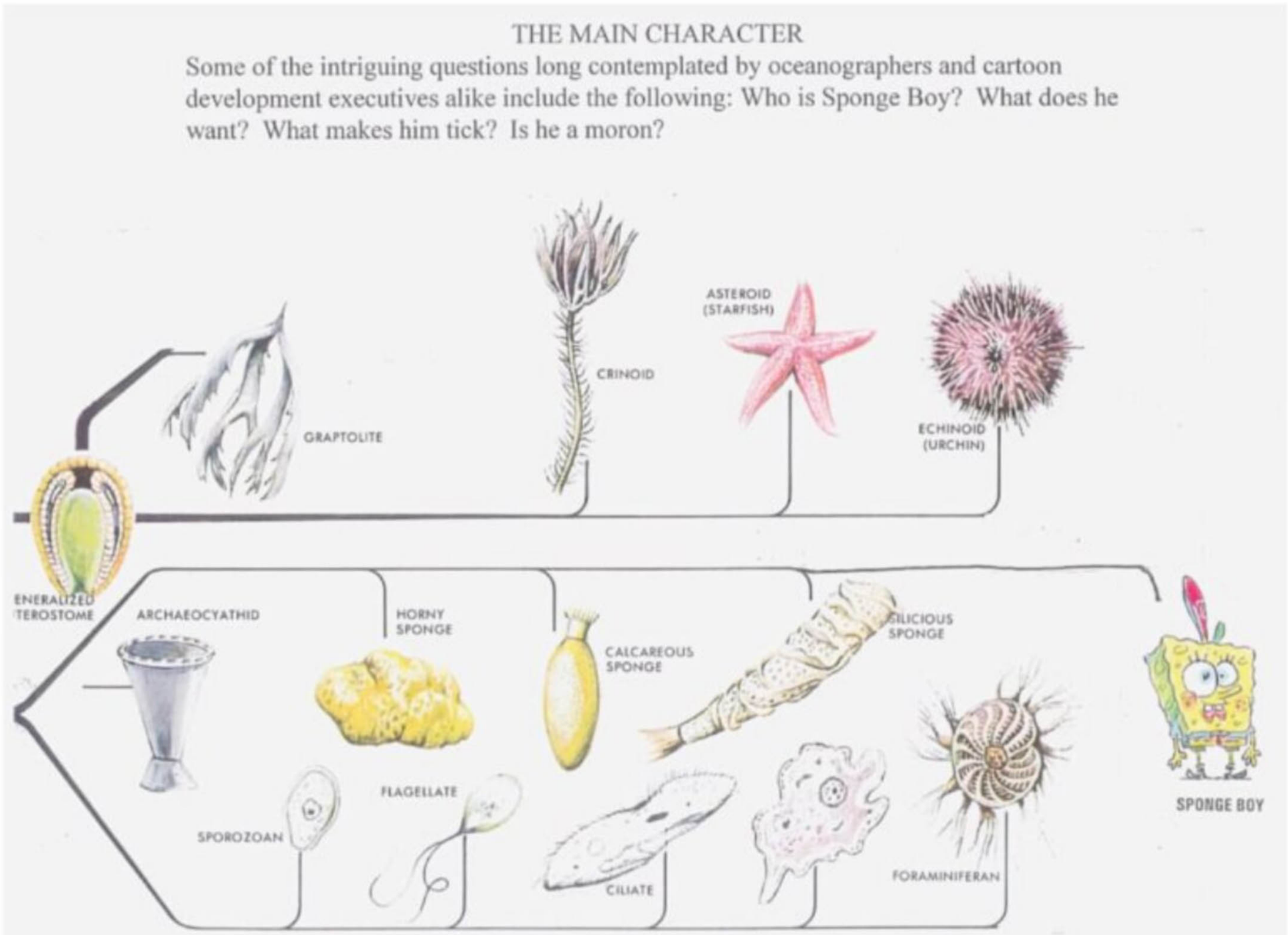
Working on the show Rocko's Modern Life *(below), Hillenburg met Martin Olson, who encouraged him to develop* The Intertidal Zone *into a cartoon.*







When Hillenburg discovered there was a pencil being marketed as Sponge Boy, he changed the name of his hero to SpongeBob.



In artwork in his pitch to Nickelodeon, Hillenburg drew a connection between real marine sponges (above) and showed characters in action (opposite).

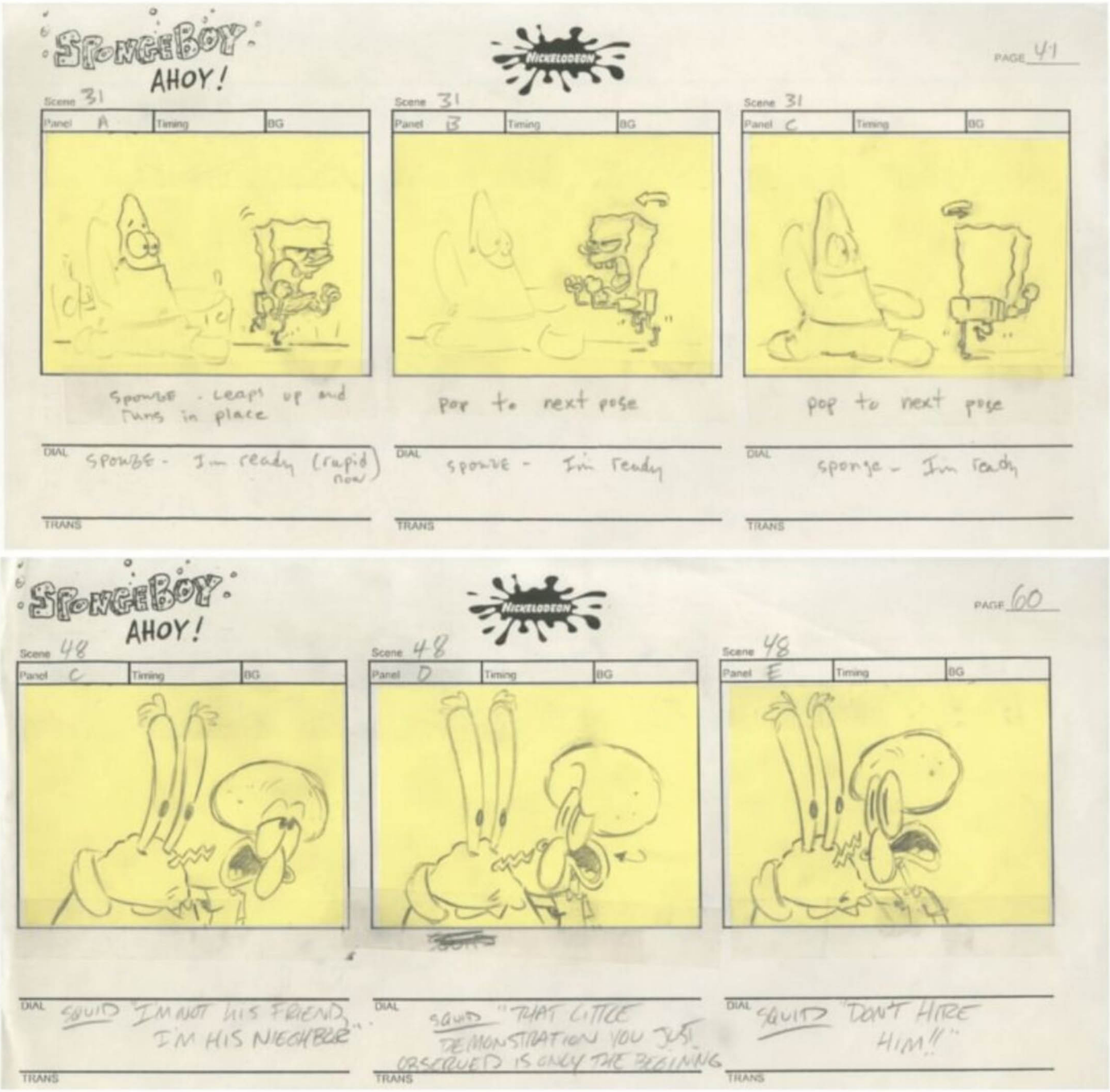
elements of his own zany, outsize personality. "Steve described SpongeBob to me as childlike and naive," said Kenny. "He's not quite an adult, he's not quite a kid. Think a Stan Laurel, Jerry Lewis kind of child-man. Kind of like a Munchkin but not quite, kind of like a kid, but not in a Charlie Brown child's voice on the TV shows. Maybe he mentioned Ed Norton from *The Honeymooners*, but Pee-wee Herman, Jerry Lewis, and Stan Laurel were go-tos for us. It was a matter of tuning in on the frequency of the voice, like you're tuning it in on a radio. "

Sponge Boy was coming into sharper focus, and when it came to pitching the idea, Hillenburg's first stop was his former employer, Nickelodeon. Not wanting to repeat his experience with book publishers, Hillenburg made sure the presentation was so good, the network *couldn't* pass. On the appointed day, Hillenburg showed up wearing a loud Hawaiian shirt and toting an aquarium with mock-ups and models of the characters inside it. He also brought along what the industry refers to as a "show bible"—a road map that suggests where the series will go if green-lit—that was packed with ocean puns, long character descriptions, suggested plotlines, and nautical-themed visuals.

There were textbook-worthy line drawings of sea creatures, like a calcareous sponge and a horny sponge, that connected to the hero of the series, Sponge Boy. There were detailed renderings in vibrant colors of Sponge Boy's room. To get ahead of network execs' natural curiosity, Hillenburg included entries like "Some of the intriguing questions contemplated by oceanographers and cartoon executives alike include the following: Who is Sponge Boy? What does he want? What makes him tick? Is he a moron?"

"I have to say I've seen a *lot* of bibles over the years, and the one that he put together for *SpongeBob*, with the seed of the idea and each of the character's descriptions, that was probably the best

'SPONGEBOY'
© S. Hillenburg '96



Developmental artwork established the dynamic between Sponge Boy, Patrick, Squidward, and Mr. Krabs (above). Opposite, Hillenburg in the 2004 SpongeBob film.

bible I've ever seen," says Marc Ceccarelli, one of *SpongeBob*'s current showrunners. "I think that probably helped a lot to sell the show, because it's just really fun and complete and you can see the potential because of how detailed and worked out everything was."

The premise of the presentation was that Hillenburg had assembled a fictional crew of underwater explorers, inspired by French oceanographer and filmmaker Jacques Cousteau (whose TV show Hillenburg adored growing up), and dispatched them on a mission. During the voyage the crew had stumbled upon the show's characters, who Hillenburg presented as an assortment of strange new species previously unknown to the world of science.

He laid it out in a Sponge Boy "expedition log" that began with a photograph of a helicopter with SPONGE BOY lettered over its pontoon, flying above a fishing trawler (also called the *Sponge Boy*), accompanied by mockingly overblown prose: "The early morning sun caressed the gentle swells of an emerald sea, as we made our way to the leeward side of the islands. Three days had passed since we began our series of dives in this remote paradise, but we

had yet to uncover the secrets of Bikini Bottom and its most renowned sponge." To sum up how audiences would react to the concept, Hillenburg created a page collaged with the faces of young people (one was a young Mischa Barton, from a Calvin Klein ad) connected by a common thought bubble inhabited by Sponge Boy. "What will the lads and lassies say to all this muck," he asked? "Why, they'll be all over it like a pelican on a kipper!"

Eric Coleman, Nickelodeon's VP of animation development and production at the time, recalled, "He had rigged up a seashell that, when you held it up to your ear, played Hawaiian music instead of ocean sounds. He had a good amount of razzle-dazzle to make the atmosphere fun." Coleman continued, "It was all there from the very first pitch. This is SpongeBob, this where he lives, this is who his best friend is, this is the cranky neighbor who lives in between them, this is where he works, these are the characters at work, this is Sandy the squirrel in her treedome. The relationships were there, and the core personality traits were all there. So as we moved forward in making the pilot and then picking up the series, it was just a matter of letting out the stories that Steve already had in his head."

The presentation worked, with Nickelodeon immediately giving *SpongeBob SquarePants* the thumbs-up. The first episode aired on May 1, 1999. It was technically a preview—the series wouldn't officially launch until two months later, on July 17, 1999—but it quickly snowballed (beach-balled?) into a word-of-mouth sensation. Before long, the show was established as a must-watch weekly blast of daffy optimism and sugar-shock fun.

Years later, Hillenburg explained that he believed the show's appeal rested in the fact that SpongeBob's "innocence prevails—which I don't think it always does in real life." He could have just as easily been talking about himself as his pipe dream of a show. After all, it takes a certain sort of innocence to look at an innocuous, everyday sea sponge and envision a fantastical, fully formed underwater universe.

Hillenburg channeled his uniquely warped sensibility and kid-at-heart genius into art that managed to make the world a sillier, stranger, and more optimistic place. In the process, he taught us that not only can innocence prevail, it *should* prevail. That sometimes the greatest adventures are the ones we take only when we leave the comfort of our cozy pineapples and set off with our weirdest pals. And that if nautical nonsense be something you wish, then sometimes you just have to drop on the deck and flop like a fish. *Are you ready, kids?? I can't hear you . . . !!*

“Why Am I Saying ‘Who’s Ready?’ Three Times?”

The cast members tell all: A short oral history of SpongeBob SquarePants.

BY DAVID CANFIELD

ON A SUNNY AFTERNOON IN 2019 AT Nickelodeon’s studios, the original *SpongeBob* cast was working on the partially live-action special *SpongeBob’s Big Birthday Blowout*. The author sat down with the gang to discuss the origins, development, and legacy of the sponge.

THE BEGINNING

TOM KENNY (SPONGEBOB): I’d worked with [creator Stephen Hillenburg] on *Rocko’s Modern Life*. So this was the easiest job I ever got: There was no audition, there was no callback, there was no “It’s down to you and two other guys.” Though I did hear that there was a push to have Fred Savage [who played Kevin Arnold in *The Wonder Years*] play SpongeBob.

CAROLYN LAWRENCE (SANDY): The audition was in a conference room, which was awkward to me. [They] left the microphone on the table and there was a fly flying around. I’m watching the fly, and it landed on the paper I had. And I killed it. I never kill anything! I totally panicked.

KENNY: Did you suck in that dead fly’s life force and channel it into your audition?

CAROLYN LAWRENCE: Oh my God, I don’t know. But when I left, I was like, “There’s no way.”

MR. LAWRENCE (PLANKTON): But that’s Sandy! That’s a Sandy moment . . . I was also friends with Steve from *Rocko*. When he was working on the *SpongeBob* pilot, I actually read for SpongeBob with Plankton’s voice. I was like [does Plankton’s voice], “I’m ready! I’m ready, Gary!” But I read all the pages like that.

RODGER BUMPASS (SQUIDWARD): I just looked at [the script] and said, “[Squidward] has got this big ol’ honking nose, he must have some nasality quality to him. He’s a little sarcastic. It was a match made in heaven with my personality.

KENNY: I felt like I just got [SpongeBob]. Steve did such a good job with it. Everything was right there.

BILL FAGERBAKKE (PATRICK): Recording [the pilot], I thought it was a dopey preschool kids’ show. I didn’t get most of the jokes. “Why am I saying ‘Who’s ready?’ three times? [And when] we were recording with helium for the sound of the anchovies. I thought, “This is the weirdest $600 I ever made.”

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

BUMPASS: In one of our first episodes, I heard [Tom changing his voice as] SpongeBob. I’m sitting there, like, “What’s he doing? He’s totally out of character!” I didn’t realize [SpongeBob] had that latitude to be anything he wanted to be . . . When we first started I was very monotone. Then we had this scene [in season 3’s “Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy IV”] with the utility belt and it zapped me, and I

Vincent Waller, Bill Fagerbakke, Marc Ceccarelli, Carolyn Lawrence, Mr. Lawrence, Tom Kenny, Rodger Bumpass, and Clancy Brown in San Diego, 2024.

had to do a sequence of screams. Each scream had to be a different type of a scream. There, they learned I could scream, so now, every episode they make me scream.

CAROLYN LAWRENCE: I can't remember the first time that Sandy got angry. But I know there's something about her being mad that became a thing.

VINCENT WALLER (COEXECUTIVE PRODUCER): It was when they were messing with Texas!

CAROLYN LAWRENCE: Right! That's where my personal life and Sandy [merged] also. When I was younger and I'd get really angry, people would laugh, and I'd be like, "I'm mad!" It's the same with Sandy.

MR. LAWRENCE: We still try to [record together] as much as we can. What's great to see every so often is when we roll down the road and there's a lot of jokes happening because we're laughing at something we're saying. It's jazz riffing. I like watching it and I like doing it.

WALLER: That's where some beautiful invention comes from that's not in the script.

KENNY: And a conviviality. It feels like a workplace.

It's funny. I used to watch *The Dick Van Dyke Show* when I was a kid, and I'd go, "Wow, that's what I want to do. I want the kind of job where you're just hanging around with funny people." This is as close to that.

CAROLYN LAWRENCE: But we were unique. A lot of shows don't record like that.

CLANCY BROWN (MR. KRABS): I love stuff [like "My leg!"] that comes out of left field.

MR. LAWRENCE: It came down to a silence. I let it go a little bit longer, and popped out, "My leg!" We all laughed and started doing it more. It became a joke for us. Nobody's writing "My leg!" in there!

"We've been protected by the fact that the show was so good and successful from the beginning. They don't really mess with us so much content-wise, even to this day."
—MARC CECCARELLI

CREATIVE CONTROL

MARC CECCARELLI (COEXECUTIVE PRODUCER): The idea of writing in a storyboard phase had fallen out of favor in television animation. The reason they brought it back for [*Ren & Stimpy*], and the reason it's so appealing for *SpongeBob*, is because it's a much more visual way of writing the story.

KENNY: One picture is worth a thousand words, right? "His tongue unrolls like a staircase. His eyes bug out and hit the wall."

MR. LAWRENCE: We often will base a whole show on just some visual we really want to see; something we start drawing.

CAROLYN LAWRENCE: As an actor, it's a lot more fun being able to get the board.

BUMPASS: [This is] the first show I was ever involved with where they gave us the storyboards in advance. It helps you so much to see what that gag is.

CAROLYN LAWRENCE: Right! You can see Sandy's jumping off an enormous mountain instead of a little mountain. You can't see that in a written script.

KENNY: Steve built a great foundation for this house. I think about that all the time, how much he knew what it was going to be.

BROWN: Different milieu, though, right? Nickelodeon was its own thing back then.

KENNY: I guess everything was a different milieu back then. I always say with *Rocko*, the inmates were running the asylum. As long as they delivered the product and there weren't any big content problems, you kind of are just left alone to make your quilt.

CAROLYN LAWRENCE: Lot of creative freedom.

KENNY: It's a little less so now. It's a double-edged sword: If something gets gigantic, there is a lot more

Patrick, Kenny, SpongeBob, and Fagerbakke in Monte Carlo, 2019. Opposite, Bumpass, Carolyn Lawrence, Fagerbakke, and Kenny at San Diego Comic-Con, 2014.

at stake. A lot more eyeballs. That's what I give [the writers] a lot of credit for, still having that subversive [quality]. *SpongeBob* still feels like a subversive show, even though it's kind of the most mainstream show of all.

CECCARELLI: We've been protected by the fact that the show was so good and successful from the beginning. They don't really mess with us so much content-wise, even to this day.

BROWN: I also think it's because nobody really knows how to f--- with it.

GUEST-STAR PARADE

BROWN: The stunt-casting sessions are always strange. You never know when somebody comes in what they're going to be like.

CAROLYN LAWRENCE: Early on, didn't it make Steve crazy? Everyone called him wanting to be on his show and he didn't want them.

BUMPASS: Bruce Willis wanted to be on.

KENNY: [Speaking] as the voice director, it's interesting too, because it's a little bit like celebrity roulette. "Wheel of Celebrities!" You had to give them almost a tutorial.

BROWN: Did you ever have to tell someone to pull back?

KENNY: No.

BROWN: Dennis Quaid came in pretty hot.

KENNY: That's true.

CAROLYN LAWRENCE: I like when Ernest Borgnine [Mermaid Man] was in and he just kept going and going.

KENNY: Same with Tim Conway [Barnacle Boy]. It was the first thing they'd done together since McHale's Navy, so that was fun to watch.

MR. LAWRENCE: It was arresting. For me, it was like if someone squeezed in your stomach.

FAGERBAKKE: Jon Hamm was awesome. He clearly was enjoying himself.

MR. LAWRENCE: I remember Scarlett Johansson coming into the first movie. She was so excited. We all got into the booth, and she had her headphones on, ready to go, but as soon as we started talking . . . she looked like she was watching a pinball machine. She got to her line and said, "I don't know if I can do that." Just the intimidation of watching us all do it at once, up front. And then: She was great!

SpongeBob: The Brainiac

The boy sponge is famous for his tighty-whities and ocean puns, but he's also the master of some sly, highbrow humor.

By Debbie Rigaud

DIRECTOR ROBERT EGGERS' 2024 gorefest, *Nosferatu*, about a haunted young woman and the vampire who stalks her, was a reboot of F.W. Murnau's silent 1922 vampire epic, *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, which itself was inspired by a foundational piece of vampire literature, Bram Stoker's 1897 novel, *Dracula*. Yet when Eggers spoke at the Los Angeles premiere of his film, he credited not Murnau, not Stoker, and not even famed *Dracula* actor Bela Lugosi for introducing Gen Z audiences to the original *Nosferatu*. Instead, the director tipped his hat to a Nickelodeon star: "Thanks, SpongeBob," Eggers deadpanned.

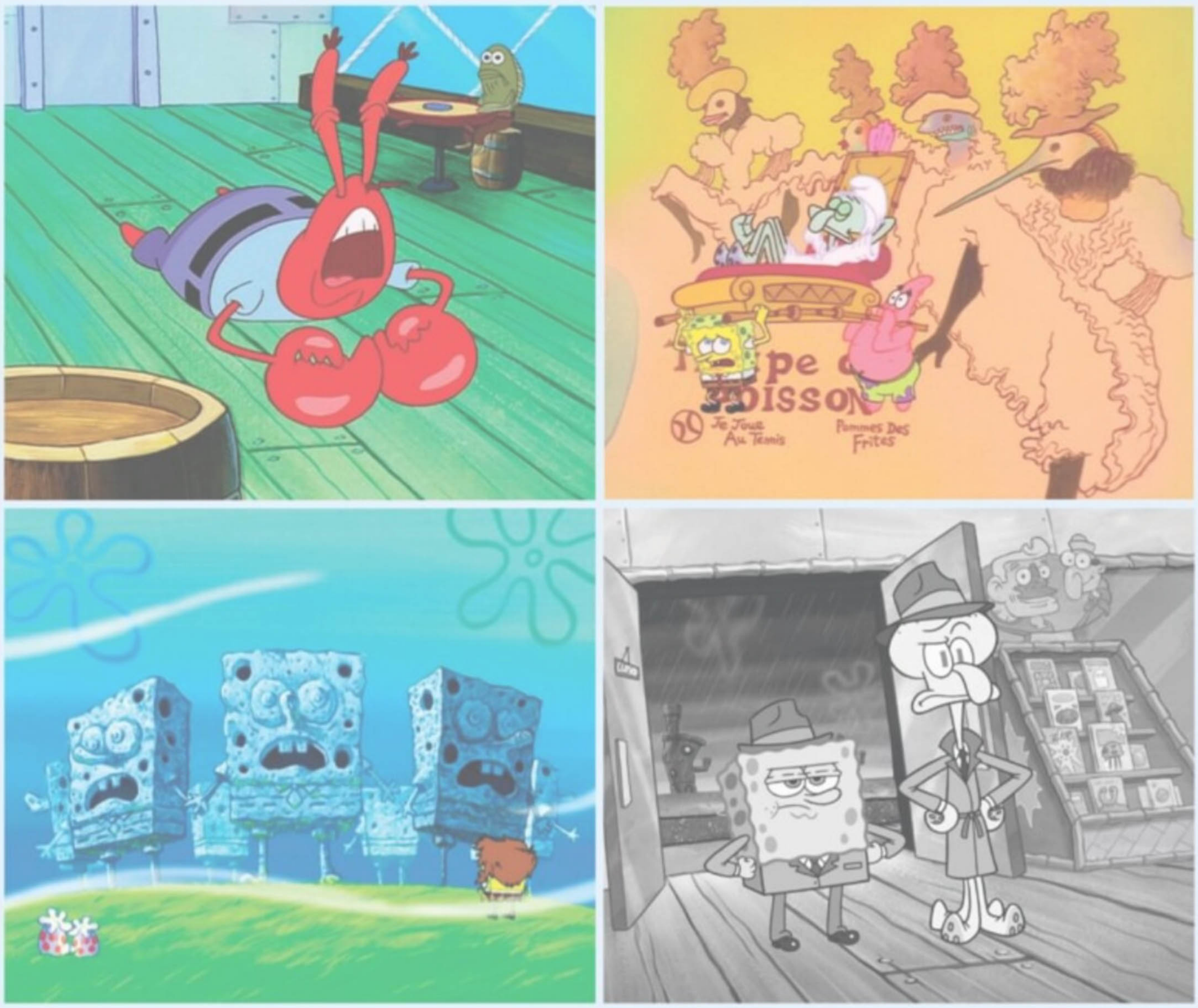
Eggers had good reason to name-check the squeaky-voiced sponge. In a 2002 episode of the show, "The Graveyard Shift," SpongeBob and Squidward are working through the night at the Krusty Krab when they are spooked by some flickering lights. At first the friends fear a murderous fry cook is coming for them, but quickly, in the loopy logic of Bikini Bottom, they realize the culprit is Nosferatu, playing a prank. A black-and-white image of the 1922 bloodsucker flashes on the screen, introducing young Gen Z viewers to a masterpiece of German expressionism and perhaps paving the way for future fans of Eggers' work.

Ever since *SpongeBob SquarePants* premiered on Nickelodeon, in 1999, audiences have tuned in faithfully for the show's oddball slapstick humor: Bikini Bottom is a place where a porous, cellulose boy gets squeezed and squashed and pops back into shape, survives every kind of calamity, and can't resist a lowbrow joke. But in between the slapstick gags and ocean puns, *SpongeBob* writers love to slip in the highbrow reference—one that is as fancy-pants as it is square. In "SB-129," Squidward is flung into the "Nowhere" dimension, a nod to the World War I dadaist art movement; in "Culture Shock," Squidward references the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg; and in "The Two Faces of Squidward," the octopus's dream alludes to Postimpressionist painter Toulouse-Lautrec's cancan classic *La Troupe de Mademoiselle Églantine*.

"It's children's entertainment that is as entertaining for the adults in the room," says Jason Donati, a professor of animation at Northeastern University. Not only does *SpongeBob* operate on multiple levels, he says, but viewers who circle back years later will find something new to laugh at. "It doesn't rely on you to be able to see the entire picture to enjoy it."

Brainy, of course, has a hallowed place in children's programming. Looney Tunes in the 1930s to late 1960s exposed generations to Beethoven and popularized works like Rossini's overture for *The Barber of Seville*. The Stone Age cartoon *The Flintstones* (1960–66) snuck in bits about Whistler's Mother, Picasso, and *Romeo and Juliet*. *Nosferatu* director Eggers recalls *Muppet Babies* (1984–1991) leading him to *Phantom of the Opera* and *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Perhaps the most famous practitioner of the intellectual throwaway is *The Simpsons*, which, among other references, has woven in nods to Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch, the 1981 cult film *My Dinner with*

"The Graveyard Shift" referenced Nosferatu, *a German expressionist film.*



Fancy-pants references (clockwise from top left): Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart", a Toulouse-Lautrec lithograph, film noir, Stonehenge.

Andre, and the complicated math formula Fermat's Last Theorem, from the 17th century.

SpongeBob SquarePants fits neatly into this tradition, melding cultural smarts with marine life, the specialty of creator Stephen Hillenburg. In considering a home for friendly SpongeBob, for example, Hillenburg chose a pineapple, the Hawaiiana symbol for "welcome" and "friendship." Hillenburg was "a very curious person," Tom Kenny, the voice of SpongeBob, once explained, "And then out of all those curiosities and interests that he had—ocean science, animation, comedy, silliness—made this show."

Hillenburg and his successors leveled up *SpongeBob SquarePants* with their animation, incorporating complex artistic styles, including pop art, hyperrealism, and surrealism, says Donati. "The further away you get from Bikini Bottom, the more abstract the animation," explains the animation professor. "The closer you get, it's very detailed, almost realistic . . . That's an interesting depth and focus you don't really see elsewhere."

What also sets *SpongeBob* apart from its contemporaries, like *Fairly OddParents* or *Phineas and Ferb,* is the show's special sauce for the character of SpongeBob. "My idea is that it's this kid that's an adult, and he has a job, and lives in a house. He's autonomous from his parents," Hillenburg shared during a podcast interview at Big Pop Fun with Tom Wilson. The "kidult" perspective gives SpongeBob an appealing innocence not unlike that of Pee-wee Herman, a comic personality who inspired Hillenburg.

"These amazing writers, creators, producers, were producing something that they found entertaining at their age as well," says Donati. "They're still aimed at children, but if they're going to live, breathe and eat this, then why not make it interesting for them?"

SpongeBob voice actor Tom Kenny agrees. "To me that's the legacy of *SpongeBob*—that it brings a smile to people when they need it."

Location, Location, Location

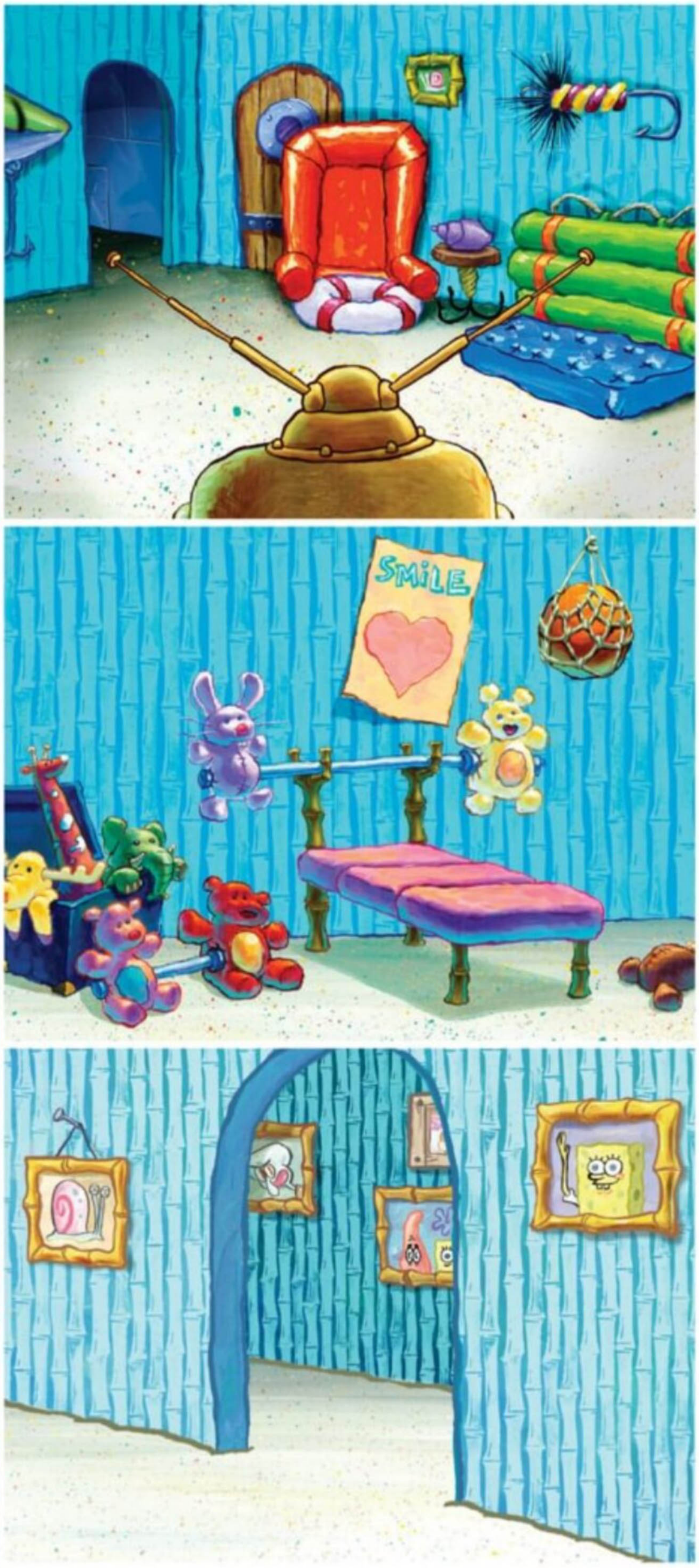
The backstory to Bikini Bottom's houses, restaurants, and favorite hangouts.

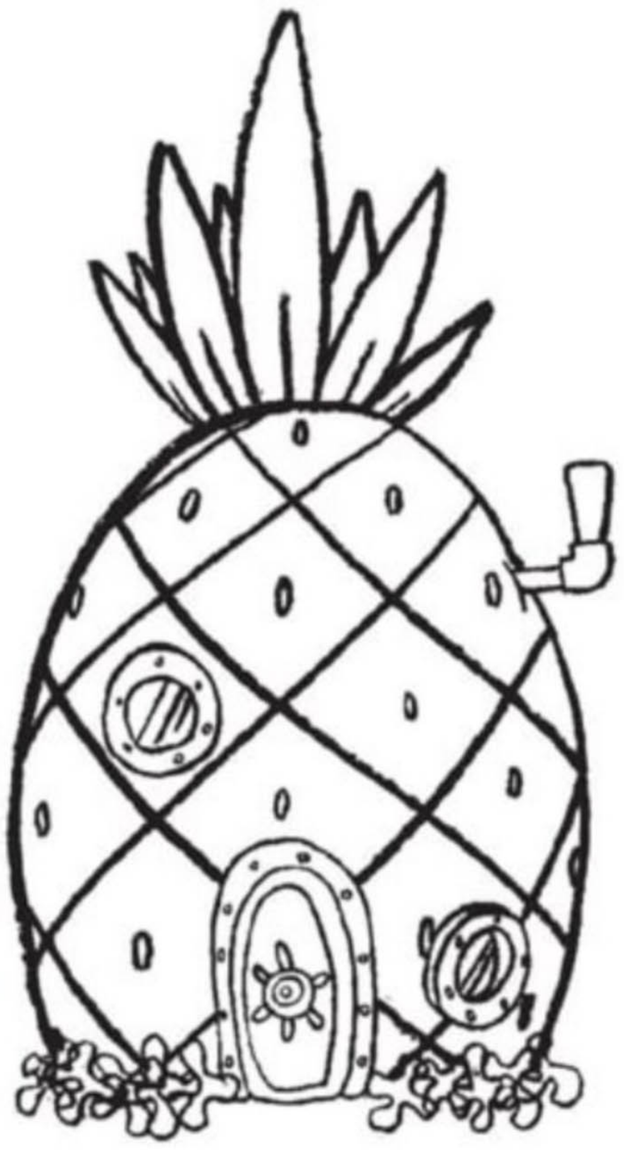
By Emma Murphy

Getting Around Bikini Bottom

In the belief-suspended world of Bikini Bottom, where *SpongeBob SquarePants* is set, the geography makes about as much sense as, well, a talking sponge. Located on the floor of the Pacific Ocean—under the Bikini Atoll of the Marshall Islands—the thriving underwater city-state shares numerous features with the earth's continental crust. There are not only mountains, dense forests, caves, and grasslands, but also lakes, reefs, rivers, and beaches. The main characters live in well-appointed homes made from items that have fallen into the sea (fruit, ocean-liner detritus, mufflers); are, like their counterparts on land, fans of fast food and fast boats; and, inexplicably, can start fires, drink water, and engage in a range of behaviors that defy the laws of physics and chemistry. Houses get bigger or smaller depending on the episode, and buildings disappear and reappear without explanation. Bikini Bottomites get their groceries at the Barg'N-Mart, keep their money at First Nautical Bank, and work out at Mussel Beach. What an utterly delightful place to visit! Herewith, our guide to Bikini Bottom and its favorite hangouts and homes.

BIKINI
BOTTOM





SpongeBob shares his pineapple with Gary the Snail and Shelley the Scallop. Clockwise from left: the pineapple on Conch Street, the living room, gym, and portraits in the hallway.

SpongeBob's Pineapple House

There are two sides to the story of why SpongeBob lives in a pineapple. There's the in-story explanation of the series, which is that the fruit fell off a ship on the ocean and landed in Squidward's garden. SpongeBob liked the pineapple and moved in. Then, there is the real-life backstory of how creator Stephen Hillenburg, a marine biologist, came up with the idea. Hillenburg was looking to all things nautical for inspiration. Free-associating, he drew a rock, a pineapple, an Easter Island moai stone head, and an old rubber boot, and concluded that, given the choice, SpongeBob would pick the fruit. The house selection was intentional, Hillenburg told MovieWeb in 2004. SpongeBob is "an optimist. He would like the smell. For me [the choice was] not random."

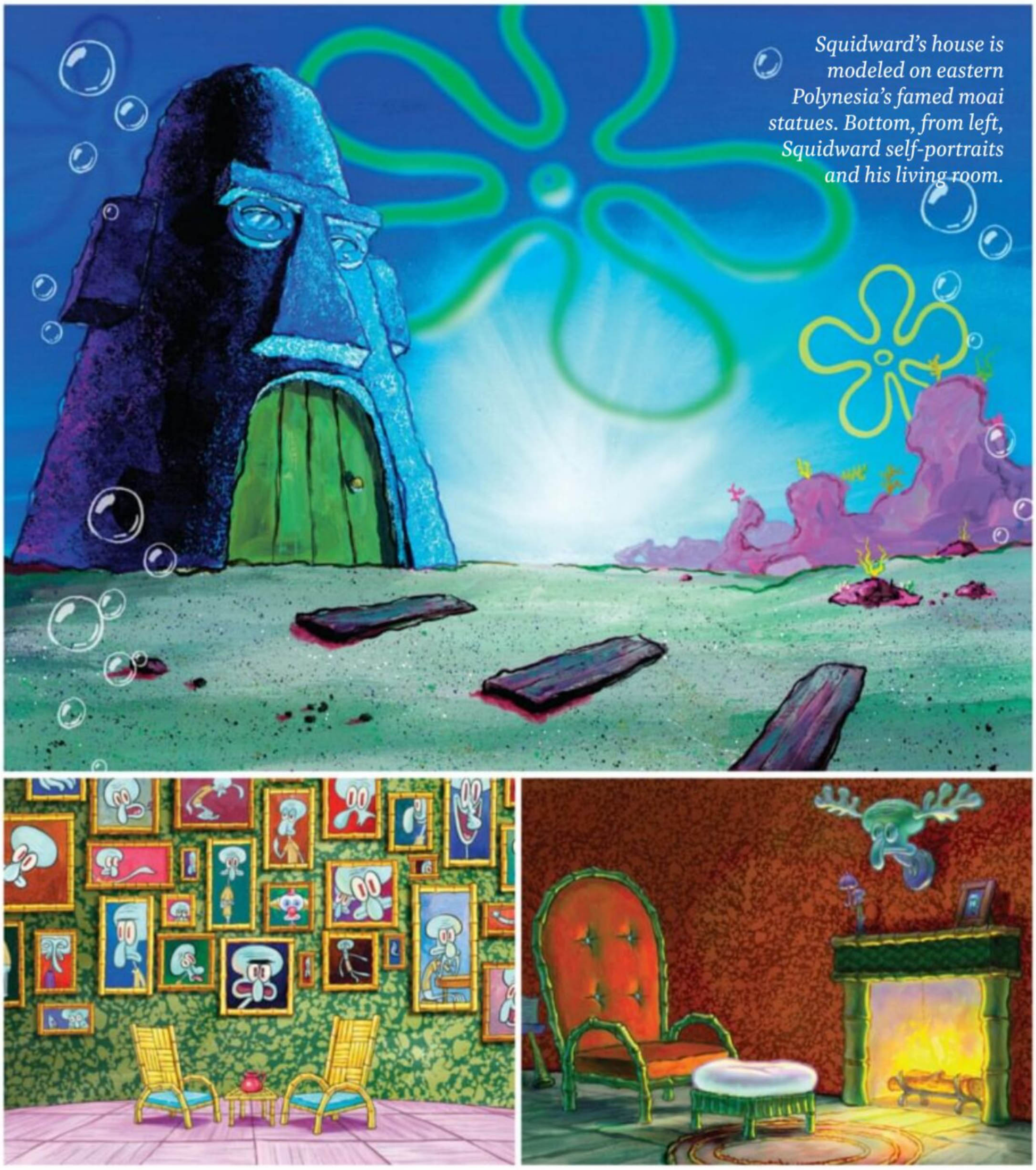
Patrick's rock is (clockwise from below) sometimes simply furnished, sometimes boasts a useless weather vane, and sometimes is shown as decorated with sand funiture.

Patrick's Rock

The expression "lives under a rock" applies to someone who is unaware of their surroundings, which pretty much sums up SpongeBob's pal, Patrick Star, Bikini Bottom's coral-colored starfish. The rock that Patrick lives under is large, brown, and empty except for the barest of furnishings: a chair, a lamp, a telephone, a barrel, and a bed with a blanket. His home is portable—sometimes Patrick picks it up and moves it— and mutable, morphing in size and decor. In some episodes the house has furniture made from sand; sometimes it has a bathroom, sometimes it has a staircase, and sometimes it has a kitchen. In season 12 (2018 to 2022), Patrick discovers that his rock is actually the shell of a turtle that overslept, a development that irritated some fans. In real life, apparently, most sea stars roam the ocean floor, scavenging for food, and do not have permanent homes.

Squidward's Tiki House

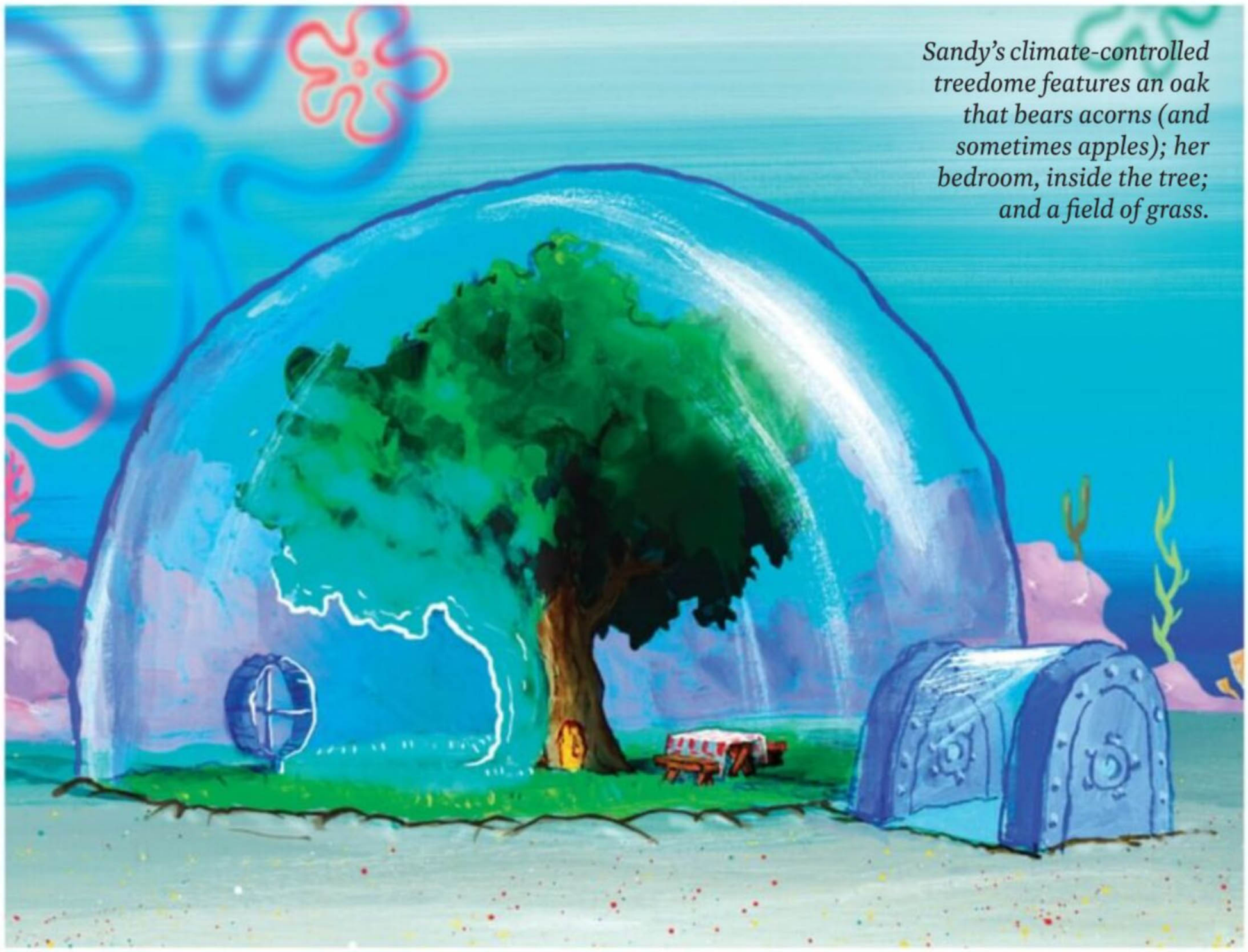
Hillenburg conceived of Squidward as an artist, and the house that seemed to best fit his personality was statue-esque: a stone structure modeled after Easter Island's famed moai figures. In Bikini Bottom, Squidward's distinctive abode is located on Conch Street, between SpongeBob's pineapple and Patrick's rock, and resembles its owner (prominent nose, permanent frown) and reflects Squidward's refined tastes (clamshell chandelier, Jacuzzi, canopy bed, elevator, artist studio). As with many locations in *SpongeBob*, Squidward's house morphs in layout depending on the episode; often it is destroyed, then magically reconstituted. For example, in one season 6 segment, Squidward enters a contest on television for house design. His chances appear to be derailed when SpongeBob accidentally blows up the head-shaped building in a vacuuming accident, but the TV host loves the resulting pile of rubble and compares it to the "post-primitive" work of a famous architect, and Squidward wins a prize.



Squidward's house is modeled on eastern Polynesia's famed moai statues. Bottom, from left, Squidward self-portraits and his living room.

Sandy's Treedome

How can the scientist-squirrel character Sandy Cheeks, a mammal, survive among the marine life in Bikini Bottom? The answer: her "treedome," a giant, clear, spherical structure sealed off from the sea with an air system to pipe in oxygen. The tree in the dome provides Sandy with acorns (or sometimes apples); there are also other squirrel-appropriate furnishings, like a running wheel and a picnic table. The structure is sometimes made of plastic; other times it's made from glass. It also transforms in size, depending on an episode's plot. SpongeBob and Patrick have a habit of somehow puncturing the dome, causing major leaks or destruction, and also ruining many of Sandy's inventions. In the world of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, a squirrel underwater may be one of the hardest plot points to swallow, but according to Kyle Hill of the Nerdist channel on YouTube, in real life the treedome could possibly exist if built with the right materials.



Sandy's climate-controlled treedome features an oak that bears acorns (and sometimes apples); her bedroom, inside the tree; and a field of grass.

Mr. Krabs is miserly, but he spares no expense on his home, which features an expansive balcony and a valuables-packed living room.

Mr. Krabs' Anchor

The restaurateur Mr. Krabs may be stingy, but he doesn't skimp when it comes to nautical decor for his anchor-shaped home: There are oars, seashells, and a ship's wheel on the walls; he has a treasure chest and a shower in the shape of a rowboat. The tastes of Mr. Krabs' daughter, Pearl, run more My Little Pony. The door to her bedroom is adorned with rainbow, heart, and star stickers, while inside the carpet is pink and the wallpaper blue with purple flowers. Like many other teens, Pearl is obsessed with a pop band (her fave is Boys Who Cry, a nod to her propensity for tears), and she has their posters covering her room. One of Pearl's favorite places in the anchor is the basement, which is filled with barrels of root beer—though SpongeBob complicates matters when he spills the soda supply during a sleepover party and has to use his power as a sponge to clean up the mess.

Mr. Krabs' restaurant looks uncannily like a lobster trap. Bottom, from left: The Krab's dining area and the kitchen where SpongeBob cooks the famed veggie burgers, Krabby Patties.

downmagaz.net

The Krusty Krab

Bikini Bottom's favorite veggie-burger joint, the Krusty Krab, appears in almost every episode, but little else about the Krab is constant, including its origin story. In season 3, the Krusty Krab is presented as a former retirement home called the Rusty Krab, which Mr. Krabs bought after being discharged from the military. In a season 6 episode, Mr. Krabs claims he was once a pirate, sailed a ship called the Krusty Krab, then sold it and opened a restaurant in its honor. Then there's the season 5 episode in which Mr. Krabs' backstory is that he has been in the fast food business since childhood. The Krab is also a source of workplace tensions; while SpongeBob loves flipping burgers, Squidward complains to Mr. Krabs about having to work with SpongeBob and about earning low wages.

The Chum Bucket

Chum—ground fish and other bait used by fishers to attract their prey—may not be the most appetizing-sounding burger ingredient to diners who are sea creatures. But the Chum Bucket's name is not its only liability.

Owned by Plankton and shaped like a pail, the Bucket is known for serving food that is inedible. The restaurant's Chum Burgers, Chum Fries, and Chum Nuggets simply cannot compete with the Krusty Krab's delicious Krabby Patties. The Bucket does have a few brief periods of success, like when Plankton hires Patrick to create a catchy ad slogan, "Chum Is Fun." But perhaps the Bucket can't build up a steady business because it's not always there. Literally. In episodes that don't include Plankton, the Chum Bucket is often missing from its usual spot on the street.

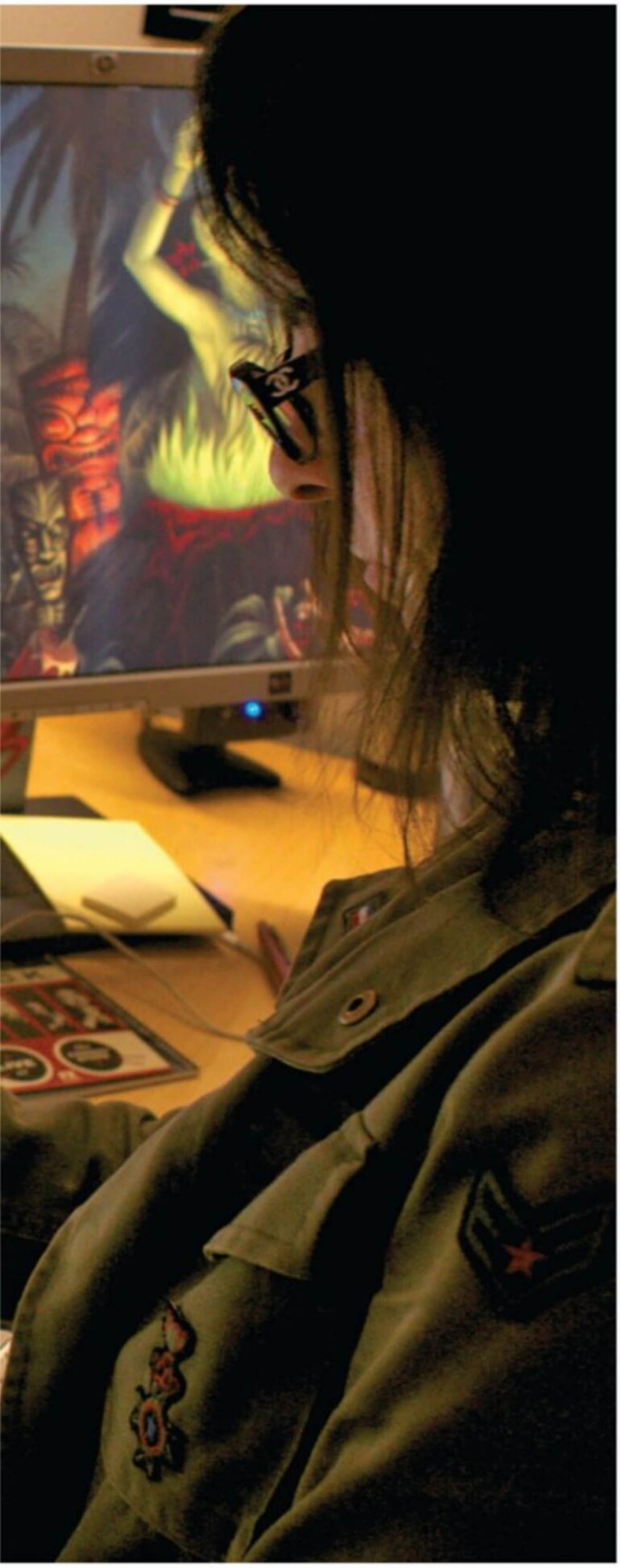
Plankton's restaurant (top) cannot compete with the Krusty Krab. Bottom, from left: The Chum's dining room and the laboratory where Plankton conducts his evil experiments.

2

BOY STORY

How an episode of *SpongeBob SquarePants* gets made, from storyboard to the small screen. Plus: the actors behind the characters and the best episodes ever.

Animators in Korea turn storyboards, shot sequences, artwork, and timing notes into 11-minute SpongeBob SquarePants *episodes.*



How It All Comes Together

From a virtual writers' room to storyboards to sound engineers to animators in Korea, *SpongeBob SquarePants* is all moving parts and magic.

BY CHRIS NASHAWATY

IT'S SAFE TO SAY THAT AFTER 16 SEASONS, more than 300 episodes, and who knows how many Krabby Patties, the brain trust behind *SpongeBob SquarePants* has turned the beloved animated series into a well-oiled machine. But behind the scenes, a lot more goes in to putting each show together than most viewers probably realize. Which is why we recently sat down with the show's longtime showrunners Marc Ceccarelli and Vincent Waller to have them walk us through how all of the manic marine-world mayhem and magic comes together.

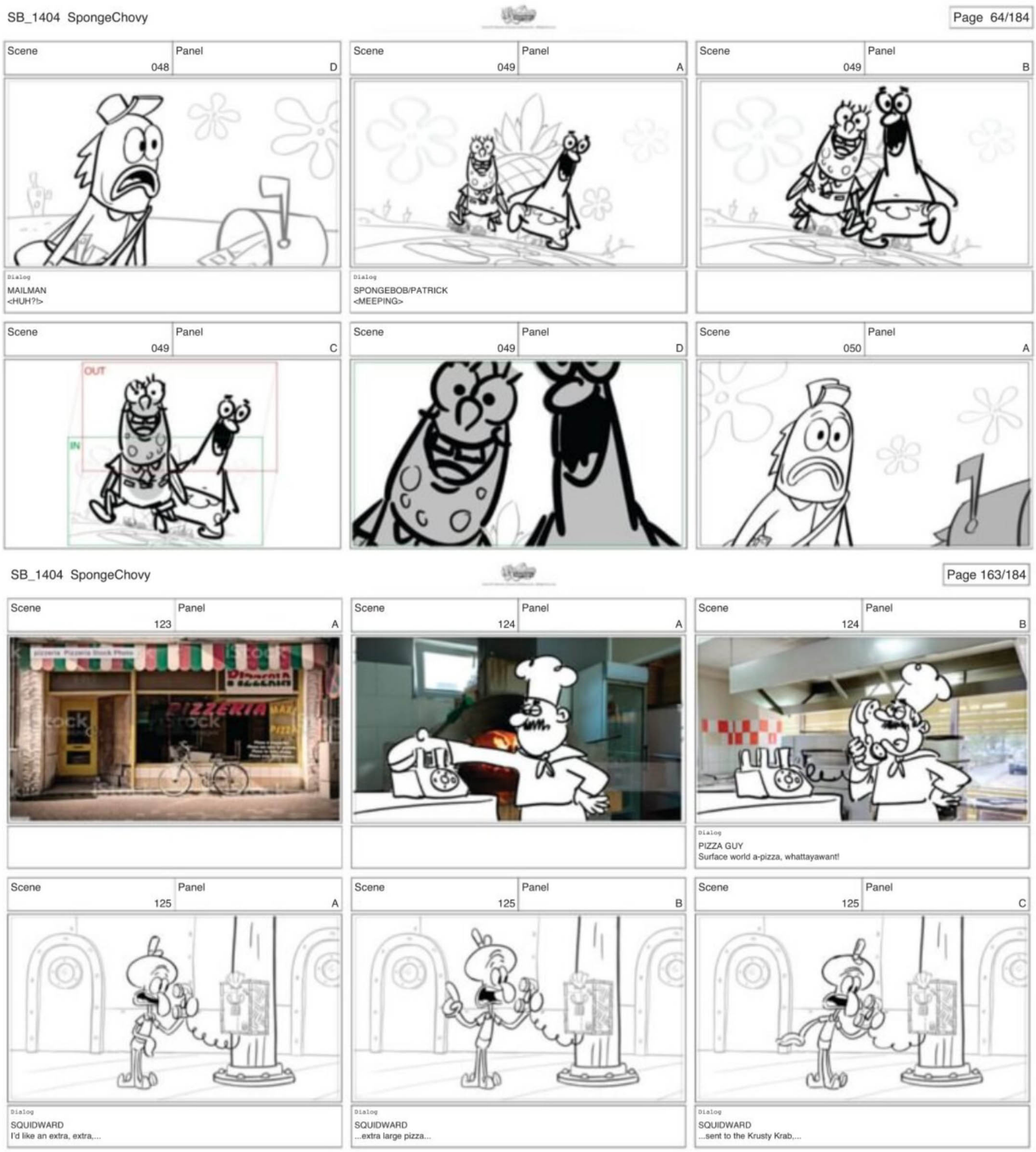
STEP ONE: THE WRITERS' ROOM

Back when Ceccarelli and Waller were elevated from staff writers to showrunners in 2015, *SpongeBob* relied on fully fleshed-out scripts like most other animated TV shows. But from their previous experience, working on such shows as *Uncle Grandpa* (Ceccarelli) and *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (Waller), the duo realized that they preferred to work with a looser outline method, which allows more visual freedom and creativity before their ideas get turned into storyboards. Today, the *SpongeBob*

writers' room is comprised of seven staffers. But instead of getting together to pitch their best (and silliest) ideas in a pizza-filled conference room in Los Angeles, for the past four years they've been meeting over video conference. You can thank COVID for that change. And both Ceccarelli and Waller do, because it turns out that batting jokes around over Zoom actually works better. At the beginning of each new season, the writers come together and kick things off anew with a fresh arsenal of absurd jokes, visual gags, and storylines that they've been squirreling away during their hiatus. These will get squished, shoehorned, and stuffed into 52 episodes each season. (Each episode runs precisely 11 minutes.) Believe it or not, many of these plotlines and punch lines are cribbed from the writers' own personal lives. "A lot of us carry around notebooks in our back pockets, so whenever an idea hits us, we scribble them down to bring to the writers' room," says Ceccarelli. Adds Waller of the all-work-and-all-play pitch process, "It's almost like 'an excitement democracy.' If you see a lot of people getting excited by an idea, then we'll stop and go down that path for a while. You can generally feel when it's right." The excitement democracy of the *SpongeBob* writers' room can sometimes feel collaborative and sometimes more like a competitive blood sport. "Everyone's trying to out-funny the other," says Waller, who's won more than his fair share of comedy battles. The ideas that end up exciting the room the most will ultimately get written on a whiteboard, which in itself is a sort of victory. After these initial sessions, the writers go off to turn these winning whiteboard ideas into "finished" scripts—which actually doesn't mean they're finished at all. Not by a long shot. In fact, the process of putting an episode of *SpongeBob* together is just getting started. The scripts will go through three or four rounds of fine-tuning and revisions. Think two weeks for outlining, then four additional weeks to shape the material into a script. Then, with fingers crossed, the scripts are sent off to Nickelodeon's standards and practices department . . .

STEP TWO: NOTES FROM THE NETWORK

Unlike with a lot of other TV shows—regardless of whether they're animated or live-action—the process of flagging words or jokes that the network



Opposite: Executive producer Marc Ceccarelli doodling on a script. Above: Storyboard artists roughed out the "SpongeChovy" episode to guide animators at Rough Draft Korea.

deems inappropriate is a fairly smooth one. After 16 seasons of *SpongeBob*, Ceccarelli and Waller have a solid grip on what they can and can't get away with. Says Waller, "Usually it's just 'Can you soften this topic?' or 'Can you make this more kid-friendly?' Generally there isn't a lot of studio interference." But, adds Ceccarelli, there remains one nixed gag that he still thinks about: "Back when I was a board writer, I came up with what I thought was the smartest fart joke ever. But it still got cut because it was a fart joke, which was a bummer."

STEP THREE: STORYBOARDS

This is where the script goes from words on a page to living, breathing visual life on storyboards courtesy of the *SpongeBob* team of cartoonists. A storyboard artist will usually have somewhere in the neighborhood of five weeks to work their Bikini Bottom magic. It's during this stage that the writers have to constantly remind themselves not to get too precious about their individual ideas. "We always leave room for the cartoonists to be cartoonists," says Waller. "Anything that comes up along the way that works and makes it funnier, we're going to go with that."

STEP FOUR: ENTER THE VOICE ACTORS

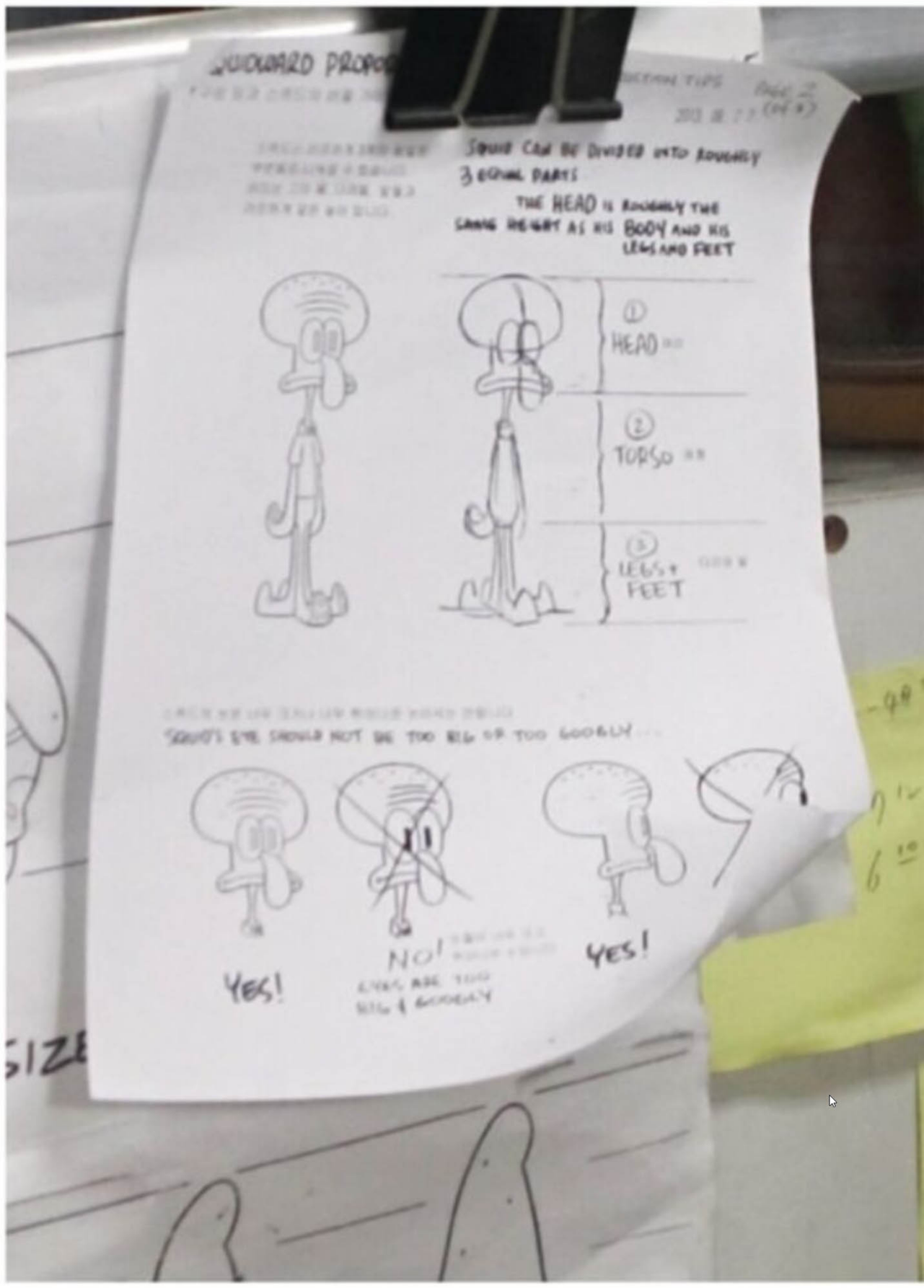
The veteran stable of actors who voice the *SpongeBob* characters (Tom Kenny as SpongeBob, Bill Fagerbakke as Patrick, Rodger Bumpass as Squidward, etc.) will head into the recording studio at Nickelodeon in Burbank, California. If possible, it's always best to have them all present at the same session so they can bounce ideas off one another. In a way, says Waller, "that's just another phase of writing, because the actors know these characters inside and out." In fact, most of the show's voice actors have been lending their tonsils to *SpongeBob* for nearly 20 years, so if they have their own ideas for how to change a line or give it their own topspin to make it work even better, they're encouraged to do so. So how long does all of this sound-booth teamwork take? "If they're all there in the studio it can be really quick," says Ceccarelli. "They'll blaze through. I mean, Tom Kenny has been doing the voice direction for something like the past eight years. And he's just phenomenal."

STEP FIVE: ANIMATICS

Next, the finished storyboards are turned into computer-generated animatics that include the staging of the characters in the scene as well as their facial expressions. Bikini Bottom backgrounds are also added to each scene. This step is where the team will take the storyboards and time them out with the actors' dialogue and the show's *boing! crash! boom!* sound effects to see how it's all going to ultimately play out on screen and how the timing of the episode is running. There is little room for flexibility or margin for error here. Says Ceccarelli, "Sometimes you get into situations where an episode is two or three minutes over at this point and then you have to start cutting without losing the humor, which is always a painful process." This stage takes another five weeks or so.

STEP SIX: OFF TO KOREA

"This is when the real nitty-gritty happens," says Waller. The *SpongeBob* team in L.A. will send literally everything—storyboards, animatics, artwork, timing notes, backgrounds—to the show's highly seasoned animators in Korea. "They take all that stuff and do the frame-by-frame animation process," says Ceccarelli. The insanely busy, Seoul-based animation studio that *SpongeBob* uses is Rough Draft Korea, which also works on such animated shows


SQUIDWARD PROPO
SQUID CAN BE DIVIDED INTO ROUGHLY 3 EQUAL PARTS
THE HEAD IS ROUGHLY THE SAME HEIGHT AS HIS BODY AND HIS LEGS AND FEET
1 HEAD
2 TORSO
3 LEGS + FEET
SQUID'S EYE SHOULD NOT BE TOO BIG OR TOO GOOGLY
YES!
NO!
YES!

as *The Simpsons* and Disney's *Big City Greens*. This back-and-forth stage of the process takes approximately three to four months.

STEP SEVEN: FINAL TOUCHES

Now we're finally in the homestretch. Or are we? It's time to dot all of the i's and cross the t's. The *SpongeBob* team in L.A. will come together for what they call "a retake session." What happens there? Excellent question. Let's let Waller explain: "We'll watch the film and look for color pops and lighting issues and various animation problems. Does it look like they're saying what's being said?" Whatever needs to be addressed and finessed will be sent back to Seoul for another round of last-minute tweaks. Back in L.A., the team will also work on such important-if-unsexy details as color timing, sound effects, and foley work (the crunch noise when SpongeBob bites into a Krabby Patty, for example). Then, the footage is given to the show's music director, who either writes brand new music for the episode or dips into

Animators at Rough Draft Korea refer to guides from Nickelodeon (opposite) to keep characters consistent. Their frame-by-frame animation process can take three or four months.

the show's massive music library from previous episodes and recycles snippets from the past. Finally, it all gets mixed together. "We'll sit with the mixer in a listening room with a nice speaker system with everything dialed to the right levels and we evaluate it," says Waller. It's a sweet job, to be sure. But according to Waller, it's one that comes with a significantly high degree of difficulty. "It can be a real ballet, you know, how do you dip this sound down just long enough so we can hear the character say his line?" All of this postproduction work takes roughly three more weeks.

STEP EIGHT: ON THE AIR

Eight months or so after the whole process began, a new *SpongeBob* episode will trundle off the production line, shiny and spit-polished to comic perfection. It will then finally make its way on to the air for fans of all ages to watch. For Ceccarelli, Waller, and all the writers, producers, and technicians, it's now time for some well-deserved R&R and downtime—perhaps kicking back with a Krabby Patty or two. But they can't get too comfortable—it will soon be time to start the process all over again. As for the showrunners, after so many labor-intensive weeks overseeing the whole thing and poring over every tiny detail, what do they do if they happen to stumble across an episode of *SpongeBob* while surfing through channels from their sofas at home? Will they leave it on and watch their handiwork or turn the channel because they're so sick of it? "Personally, I find that I enjoy the episodes much more if I can give myself some space from them," says Ceccarelli. "If I watch an episode a couple of years later, I end up enjoying it a lot more than when I'm still in it."

The Best Episodes Ever? Let's Debate.

Ranking greatness is tough, but why not try. Here are our favorites. Feel free to agree or disagree.

By Courtney Mifsud Intreglia

IN ONLY 11 MINUTES, A GREAT *SPONGEBOB* EPISODE offers a number of things: goofy antics, gleefully absurd stories, and quotable one-liners. It doesn't hurt if there's a banger or two (à la "Goofy Goober Rock"). Picking the absolute best 10 episodes from 16 seasons over 25 years, however, isn't easy. To come up with our list, we went on a *SpongeBob* binge, made our Sophie's choices, and came up with the following.

10

"Wet Painters"

SEASON 3, EPISODE 10

Mr. Krabs dispatches SpongeBob and Patrick on a "super, special, secret assignment": to paint the inside of his house. After threatening to cut off their rear ends should a drop of paint end up anywhere but the walls, Mr. Krabs leaves. Naturally, though SpongeBob and Patrick do their best to keep things clean, a splatter-fest follows, and while they are able to protect most of their boss's possessions, they end up painting over his prized dollar bill.

9

"Texas"

SEASON 1, EPISODE 18

Sandy is missing Texas, where she was born, and she breaks into the blues tune "I Wanna Go Home." The squirrel's Bikini Bottom pals try to cheer her up by throwing a Lone Star State bash. They don't get all of the details right, but the message is clear: The community in Bikini Bottom comes together for its own.

8

"Shanghaied"

SEASON 2, EPISODE 13

While he had appeared before in quick bits, the Flying Dutchman has his first major plotline in this episode, in which SpongeBob, Patrick, and Squidward mistakenly board his ghostly ship. The Dutchman tosses Squidward into an interdimensional portal, while SpongeBob and Patrick plot a harrowing escape through a perfume department.

7

"Bubble Buddy"

SEASON 2, EPISODE 3

With his friends busy for the day, SpongeBob invents a new playmate, Bubble Buddy, to celebrate his favorite holiday, Leif Erikson Day. At Goo Lagoon, the two hold up the restroom, leave a fish to face high tide, and otherwise annoy beachgoers, who, in turn, riot and threaten to pop Bubble Buddy with sewing needles for ruining their day. As SpongeBob tries to calm the crowd, Bubble Buddy hails a bubble taxi and escapes into the sky.

6

"Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy"

SEASON 1, EPISODE 6

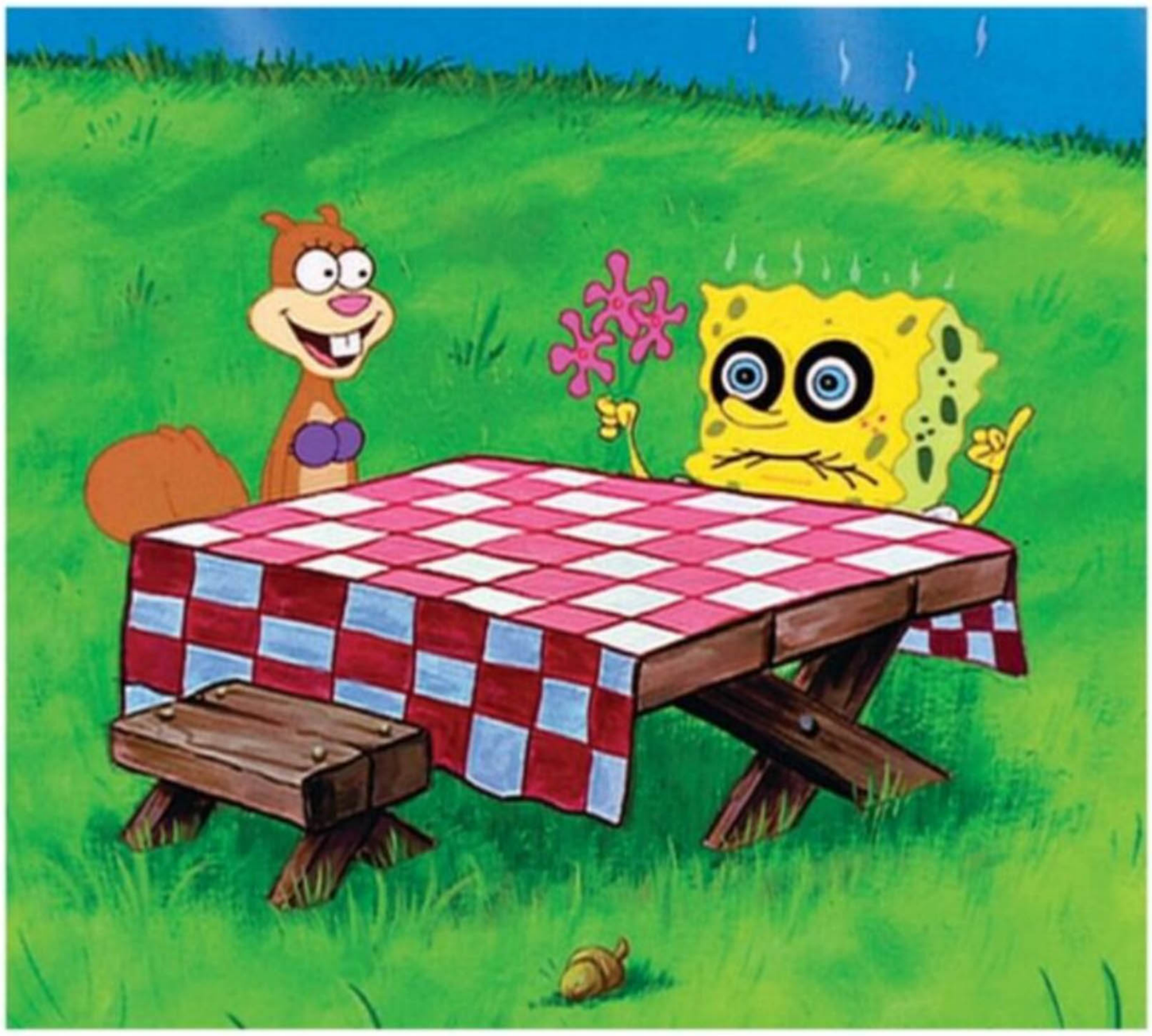
SpongeBob and Patrick visit Shady Shoals Rest Home to bring their favorite superheroes, Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy, out of retirement. At first, the crime fighters resist, but SpongeBob and Patrick are so persistent—and annoying—that Mermaid Man and his sidekick relent. SpongeBob and Patrick's joy at their success is short-lived: Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy grow so weary of the BFFs that they sling them from Shady Shoals as soon as possible.

5

"Tea at the Treedome"

SEASON 1, EPISODE 1

In the first episode of the series, viewers meet Sandy Cheeks and discover one of SpongeBob's weaknesses: He is too polite. When our hero visit's Sandy's air-based biome, he begins to dehydrate. Not wanting to bother his host, SpongeBob tries, discreetly, to absorb trace amounts of water, but nevertheless dries up, as does Patrick. Sandy discovers the two in distress, gives them water-filled helmets so they can reconstitute, and the three share a pot of tea.



4

"Help Wanted"

SEASON 1, SERIES PILOT

Viewers are introduced to the sleepy town of Bikini Bottom, as well as a not so sleepy sponge, eager to apply for a position as a fry cook. The plot follows SpongeBob to his interview at the Krusty Krab, where owner Mr. Krabs informs him that, to be hired, he must acquire a seemingly nonexistent hydrodynamic spatula. SpongeBob both locates the kitchen tool and arrives back from his quest just as the Krab is beset by scores of hungry anchovy customers. He grills up some Krabby Patties and gets the job.

3

"F.U.N."

SEASON 1, EPISODE 10

When Plankton tries to steal the Krabby Patty formula, SpongeBob decides to befriend the brilliant but bumbling (and evil) scientist. As Plankton fixates on global domination, SpongeBob encourages him to loosen up and follow his example, by singing the "F.U.N. Song." Plankton seemingly gets in the mood—even injecting his own violent lyrics into the tune—but, as Mr. Krabs later reveals, Plankton was just biding time until another (failed) attempt to steal the Krabby Patty recipe.

2

"Chocolate with Nuts"

SEASON 3, EPISODE 12

An issue of *Fancy Living Digest* inspires SpongeBob and Patrick to become door-to-door chocolate salesmen. The episode introduces an absurd cast of characters, including a deranged fish who only screams "CHOCOLATE" and a con artist, disguised as a badly injured man, who exclaims, "I was born with glass bones and paper skin. Every morning I break my legs, and every afternoon I break my arms. At night, I lie awake in agony until my heart attacks put me to sleep."

1

“Band Geeks”

SEASON 2, EPISODE 15

When Squidward receives a call from his high school rival, Squilliam Fancyson, the sourpuss clarinet player sets out to form a marching band that will outshine Fancyson’s at the upcoming Bubble Bowl. Little goes as planned, of course, and Squidward’s Bikini Bottom recruits seem destined to fail. There are miscommunications, mishaps, late-night brawls, and Patrick’s immortal, nonsensical question, “Is mayonnaise an instrument?” Yet the final performance by Squidward’s crew is genuinely spectacular. SpongeBob’s epic rock ballad, “Sweet Victory,” has become so beloved that it was performed during the 2024 Super Bowl.

The Disappeared

When Paramount+ launched in 2021, it offered the whole of the *SpongeBob* back catalog, except for "Mid-Life Crustacean." Fans wanted to know why.

BY EILEEN DASPIN

"I GUESS YOU'RE GOING TO MISS THE panty raid."

If you're not familiar with the famous line, dropped by Patrick in "Mid-Life Crustacean" from season 3 of *SpongeBob*, it might be because the 11-minute segment, from 2003, has been scrubbed from the otherwise complete Paramount+ back catalog of *SpongeBob* episodes, likely due to said panty raid.

Why the exclusion? Hard to say precisely, as the quiet absence of "Crustacean" from the streaming platform only became noticeable in 2021, when Paramount+ launched and die-hard fans and nosy media types began asking questions. At the time, Nickelodeon noted that the episode had been out of circulation since 2018 on the grounds that "some story elements were not kid-appropriate" but declined to elaborate further.

SpongeBob sleuths had their theories and pointed to the panty raid storyline as the likely culprit. The plot goes like this: Mr. Krabs, feeling old, tries to worm his way into an evening of fun with SpongeBob and Patrick. When he discovers that their idea of a good time is a bunch of childish activities, Mr. Krabs starts to back out—until Patrick taunts him with the promise of the lingerie adventure. The fact that the women's panties the BFFs are planning to raid belong to Mr. Krabs' mom does not appear to be a deterrent. Naturally, Mom catches them in action, gives them an earful, and grounds Mr. Krabs.

Cue the content monitors. "Mid-Life Crustacean" was pulled from both Paramount+ and Prime Video on grounds that its adult theme and uncomfortable humor was not suitable for young audiences.

In "Mid-Life Crustacean," Mr. Krabs joins SpongeBob and Patrick on a panty raid. The episode has been cut from streaming services.

(An older demographic launched a change.org petition to bring the episode back, to no avail, though intrepid webmasters can still find the show in corners of the internet.)

The move came at a time when other streaming platforms and publishers were seeking "to give audiences context for older films, television shows, and books that carry offensive content," reported the *New York Times*, adding that the children's graphic novel *Captain Underpants* had been yanked from circulation a week prior, for Asian stereotypes that perpetuated passive racism.

There have been a handful of other *SpongeBob* episodes that have been dropped from rotation, including season 12's "Kwarantined Krab," in which a disease called the "Clam Flu" races around Bikini Bottom. The show was temporarily cut because it was slated to premiere in 2020, as the COVID pandemic started.

As for "Mid-Life Crustacean," parentingpatch.com, a parenting website, suggests the panty hullabaloo misses the main point of the show. "The episode demonstrates that age should not define one's ability to have fun and enjoy life," the site notes. "SpongeBob and Patrick show Mr. Krabs that adventure can be found at any stage in life, encouraging kids to embrace their own youthful spirits."

Dark Fan Theories

Is SpongeBob a Marxist? A drug addict? A figure of lust? Among the show's creative-thinking viewers, speculation runs amok.

By Eileen Daspin

THERE'S LITTLE THE INTERNET LIKES better than spinning conspiracy theories about famous characters, from Hello Kitty to Harry Potter to Cinderella. SpongeBob and the residents of Bikini Bottom are rich fodder. Here are some theories, as daft as the show itself.

THE MARXIST READING

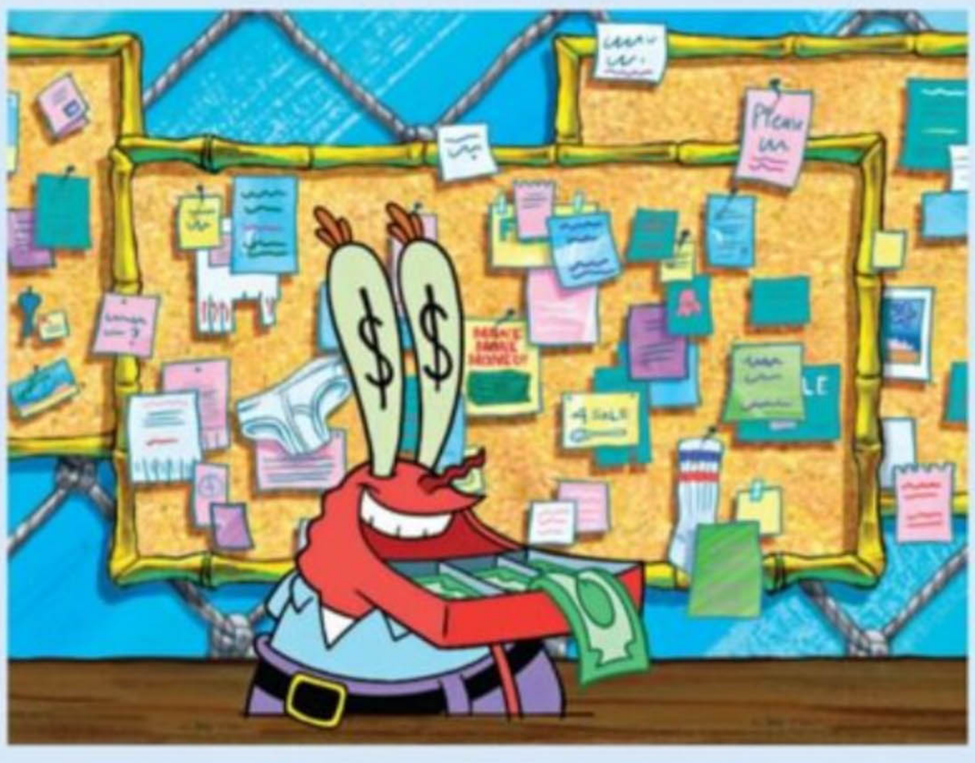
With money-obsessed restaurant owner Mr. Krabs overworking and underpaying his Krusty Krab employees, SpongeBob and Squidward, it was almost too easy for dark-fan theorists to read into *SpongeBob SquarePants* a critique of capitalism. In fact, "SpongeBob Marxistpants" is a favorite theme on academic sites, personal blogs, TikTok, graduate theses, Reddit, and Medium. YouTuber Adam Zeloof, for one, casts Mr. Krabs as a stingy member of the privileged upper class who imposes "hegemonic control over a lower class." (Cut to clips of Krabs dreaming of a cash register, snatching bills from SpongeBob's hands, and refusing to donate to a children's charity.) Zeloof also interprets SpongeBob as a manipulated member of the underclass who is blissfully oblivious to the abuse and who worships Mr. Krabs, while posters on Reddit have theorized that Sandy represents the liberal academic elite, and Plankton the petty bourgeoisie.

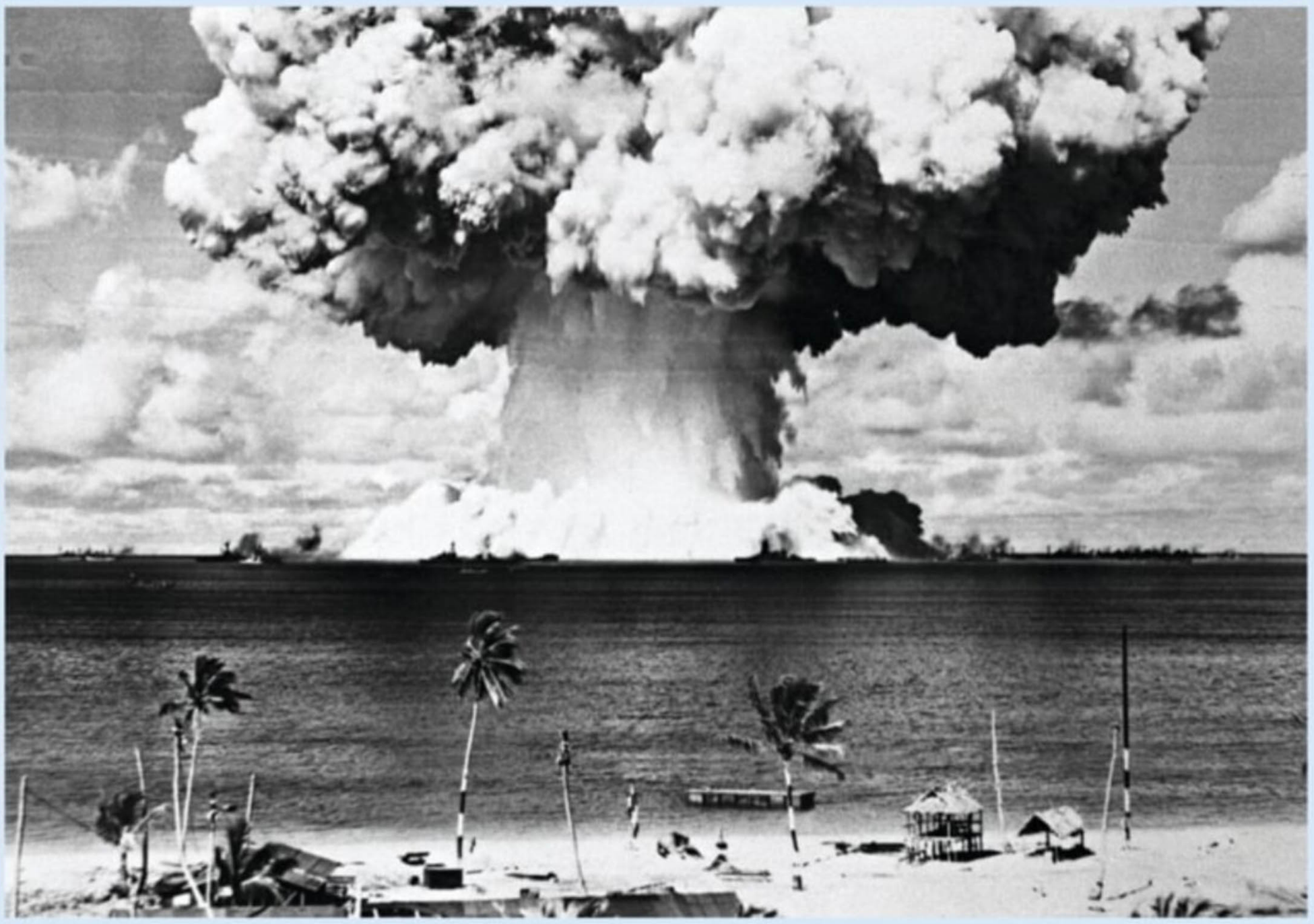
ADDICTION THEORY

In this dope-y universe of SpongeBob fan analysis (YouTube, fandom.com), each character represents a different type of drug addiction. There's SpongeBob, whose boundless energy and mood swings are either linked to use of psychedelic mushrooms or are held up as evidence that our hero is hooked on amphetamines. The reason Patrick is so laid-back and always hungry? Naturally, because he smokes too much weed. Speculation about Mr. Krabs' anxiety over his Krabby Patty formula and his obsession with money points to cocaine abuse, while Squidward's depression and history as an underperformer are said to align with heroin addiction. (This idea gained currency in the stoner parody series, *SpongeBong Hemppants*, in which SpongeBob lives in a bong and gets up to no good with friends like Spliffward.) Some dark fan theorists even say that the Krabby Patty itself contains an addictive substance, keeping the residents of Bikini Bottom hooked and coming back for more.

SEVEN DEADLY SINS

In early Christian theology, the seven deadly sins are pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth, and in some corners of *SpongeBob* fandom, the series is cast as an examination of these capital vices. Sandy is pride; Mr. Krabs is greed; SpongeBob is lust; Plankton is envy; Gary is gluttony; Squidward is wrath; and Patrick, sloth. Legit sites, like ScreenRant, many YouTube videos, college essays, and Reddit threads discuss the permutations of this theory in great detail, with the through line being how each *SpongeBob* character deals with





Opposite, from left: Fans theorize that Mr. Krabs represents greed and that Patrick smokes pot. This page: The Bikini Atoll, a former nuclear testing site.

life's trials and tribulations while bearing their corresponding vice. Patrick, for example, has never had a stable job and literally sleeps under a rock. Plankton, Bikini Bottom's villain, lives and breathes to steal the Krabby Patty formula. Mr. Krabs lives for money and will do anything to get it. And so on.

GOING NUCLEAR

Bikini Bottom, hometown to SpongeBob and friends, is named after the Bikini Atoll, the real-life location in the Marshall Islands (in the Pacific Ocean, between Hawaii and Australia) where the United States conducted dozens of nuclear tests from 1946 to 1958. While *SpongeBob SquarePants* creator Stephen Hillenburg and his colleagues have dismissed many dark-fan theories (like the ones about drugs), in this case the conspiracy theorists seem to have gotten it right: The bizarre sea creatures of Bikini Bottom apparently are a result of genetic mutations caused by nuclear radiation. In an interview with *Esquire*, writer Doug Lawrence, who voices Plankton and has written many *Sponge Bob* episodes, confirmed that the show represents theoretical results of the real-world atomic testing, and that the show takes place after a postapocalyptic war. "That was part of the fun of it," Lawrence said. "I mean, right at the beginning when we were sort of developing it in the first season, it was like, 'Are we going to play off of this apocalyptic thing?' Like, the whole world is dead except for Bikini Bottom."

THAT'S GARBAGE

This fan thesis: Bikini Bottom is not an imagined underwater wonderland, but a cesspool on the ocean floor, made of garbage pollution. One source of the hypothesis is the season 7 episode "Keep Bikini Bottom Beautiful," in which the inciting plot incident involves Squidward stepping on a wad of gum, being slapped with a ticket for littering, and later realizing that his house and everything in it is made of trash. (The octopus runs screaming out of the moai.) Conspiracy theorists point to the houses in Bikini Bottom, which they say are fashioned from old car mufflers that have fallen into the ocean; to Goo Lagoon, which they say is motor oil; to Squidward's moai house, which, according to at least one website, is an old fish tank decoration; to the Krusty Krab, which speculators say is either an old crab trap (that Mr. Krabs was once trapped in) or an abandoned lobster trap; and to the Chum Bucket, which they say is an actual plastic bucket. The takeaway is that Bikini Bottom is what happens when humans throw their junk in the ocean. Eww.

From left: Bill Fagerbakke (Patrick), Rodger Bumpass (Squidward), Tom Kenny (SpongeBob), Mr. Lawrence (Plankton), Clancy Brown (Mr. Krabs), and Carolyn Lawrence (Sandy).

Meet the Voices Behind the Characters

Who are the actors who've been putting their hearts and sounds into the series since 1999?

By Kate Hogan and Paris C.

SPONGEBOB HAS ONE OF THE MOST distinctive voices in all of Bikini Bottom—high-pitched, squeaky, and staccato; Squidward is monotone and nasal (described once, brilliantly, as sounding as if he's from Connecticut and annoyed about it); Patrick is flexible and low-pitched; Sandy sounds like she's from the Deep South; and Mr. Krabs could be a pirate or just a Scottish tough.

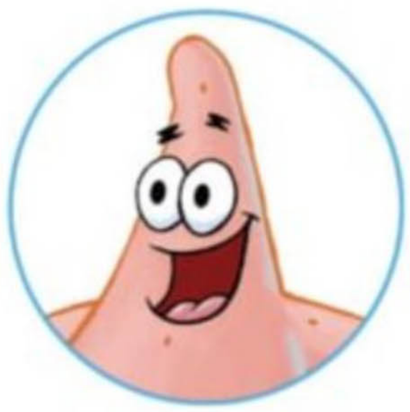
Who are the actors who created these unforgettable voices? You might not know their names or faces, but they have been as key to the success of *SpongeBob SquarePants* as creator Stephen Hillenburg and the succession of showrunners who've followed him. Many, like Tom Kenny, who voices SpongeBob (and who met Hillenburg when the two worked on an earlier series, *Rocko's Modern Life*), have been with the series from the very beginning. Mr. Lawrence, who plays Plankton, has voiced several other characters on the show and is also a graduate of *Rocko's Modern Life,* in addition to being one of the show's longtime writers. Jill Talley, the voice of supercomputer Karen Plankton, is also Mrs. Tom Kenny.

Here, get to know your cast. Ahoy, mates!

SpongeBob SquarePants

TOM KENNY

Daytime Emmy winner Tom Kenny, the voice of the sponge himself, has more than 590 IMDb credits to his name, primarily for voice acting. Apart from his voice-over work, Kenny has appeared on screen in such films as *Scary Movie 3* (2003), *Sky High* (2005), and *Battle of the Sexes* (2017). He's also a talented comedian and the lead vocalist of Tom Kenny & The Hi-Seas, which, according to the group's Instagram, is a 13-piece "rockNsoul" party band.



Patrick Star

BILL FAGERBAKKE

Although Bill Fagerbakke is best known for voicing SpongeBob's best friend, Patrick Star, he's had small-screen success in front of the camera. Most notable, he played assistant football coach Michael "Dauber" Dybinski on *Coach* from 1989 to 1997, as well as Marshall's beloved dad, Marvin, on *How I Met Your Mother* for 12 episodes. Fagerbakke has also appeared on the popular shows *Black-ish*, *Young Sheldon,* and *Dynasty,* among others, and in such movies as *Jennifer's Body* (2009) and *The Artist* (2011).

Squidward

RODGER BUMPASS

Bumpass is perhaps best known for his voice work as the short-tempered Squidward—he was nominated for a Daytime Emmy in 2012 for the role—but he's also lent his vocal talents to shows including *CatDog, Rugrats, Invader Zim,* and *Teen Titans*, and to feature films including *Toy Story 2* (1999), *Spirited Away* (2001), *Lilo & Stitch* (2002), and Cars (2006). Additionally, Bumpass appeared in John Carpenter's sci-fi action movie *Escape from New York* (1981) and the Arnold Schwarzenegger dystopian flick *The Running Man* (1987).

Mr. Krabs

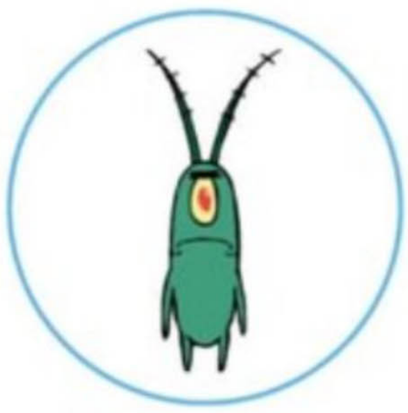
CLANCY BROWN

The voice of the cranky Mr. Krabs since the show's inception, Clancy Brown also acts in dramas, with film credits including *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *Dead Man Walking* (1995), and *John Wick: Chapter 4 (2023).* On the small screen, Brown has appeared in *The Goldbergs,* as a drama teacher, in *Billions*, as a politician, in *Dexter: New Blood*, as a serial killer; and in the the superheroes series, *Gen V*, as Professor Brink.

Sandy Cheeks

CAROLYN LAWRENCE

Besides voicing the anthropomorphic squirrel Sandy Cheeks, Carolyn Lawrence has built her résumé with other popular animated works. *Jimmy Neutron* fans might recognize her as the voice of Cindy Vortex; she also voiced Mandragora in *Winx Club: The Secret of the Lost Kingdom* (2012).



Plankton

MR. LAWRENCE

Douglas Lawrence Osowski, known professionally as Mr. Lawrence, doesn't just voice the pint-size Plankton on the show—he's also played recurring characters including Larry the Lobster, Potty the Parrot, and Fred, and he's one of *SpongeBob SquarePants*' longtime writers. Additionally, Osowski has worked behind the scenes on *The Ren & Stimpy Show, The Grim Adventures of Billy & Mandy,* and *Rocko's Modern Life.*

Cameo Appearances

Since the earliest episodes, *SpongeBob* producers have cast many famous vocal cords to bring some small characters to life. Here are 10.

BY EILEEN DASPIN

Amy Poehler

GRANDMA

While on *Saturday Night Live*, Poehler cocreated *The Mighty B!* for Nickelodeon, so her return to the network as Grandma in season 4's "Have You Seen This Snail?" was a sort of homecoming.

Gene Simmons

SEA MONSTER

The Kiss frontman and his partner, Shannon Tweed, both voiced characters in the season 5 episode "20,000 Patties Under the Sea." Simmons was an angry sea monster, and Tweed played his mother.

Biz Markie

KENNY THE CAT

The hip-hopper's season 9 character is idolized by Bikini Bottomers for holding his breath for a long time—until SpongeBob discovers the Cat is relying on an oxygen tank.

Betty White

BEATRICE

In pitch-perfect casting in season 9, producers chose White to play Beatrice, a store owner who hires Pearl. Beatrice gives off old lady vibes but is a powerhouse.

Pat Morita

MASTER UDON

Playing against type, Morita, of *Karate Kid* fame, voiced the con man Master Udon in season 4's "Karate Island." Udon tries, but fails, to trick SpongeBob into buying real estate.

Aubrey Plaza

NOCTURNA

In a pure Plaza performance, the comedian in season 9 plays a goth-girl cashier at the Scorched Coral in the Bikini Bottom Mall who teases Pearl and makes her feel uncool.

David Bowie

LORD ROYAL HIGHNESS (LRH)

The typically polite emperor of Atlantis loses his cool in season 5 when SpongeBob and Patrick pop the world's oldest bubble and LRH sends out a squad to catch them.

Ernest Borgnine and Tim Conway

MERMAID MAN AND BARNACLE BOY

Stars of the iconic 1960s sitcom *McHale's Navy*, about a World War II PT-boat crew, Borgnine and Conway delighted a new generation of viewers as the recurring characters Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy, elderly superheros in SpongeBob and Patrick's favorite TV show.

Victoria Beckham

QUEEN AMPHITRITE

The former Posh Spice voiced Queen Amphitrite, a mermaid who rules the ocean with her husband, King Neptune, in season 6's "The Clash of Triton."

Johnny Depp

JACK KAHUNA LAGUNA

In season 6's "SpongeBob SquarePants vs. The Big One," Depp plays a surfer who saves Mr. Krabs from drowning. Another episode celeb guest: Davy Jones of the Monkees.

3

AHOY, WORLD

More than a cartoon character, SpongeBob is an entertainment and sociological phenom around the globe—in pop culture and on the internet, the Broadway stage, and the silver screen.

SpongeBob's expressive face has given rise to roughly 22,000 memes, like this seat belt one, which can be used to express confusion or fear.

SpongeBob Memes Bobbing on the Internet's Sea

There are more than 22,000 SpongeBob images that populate social media as memes. Which are some of the net's favorites?

By Rachel E. Greenspan

THANKS TO FANS OF SPONGEBOB, Mr. Krabs, Patrick, Squidward, Sandy, and Plankton, *SpongeBob SquarePants* is ubiquitous on the internet and some of us can't check our social media feeds without coming across a few memes inspired by the show. "I can't think of anything else like it," says Tom Kenny, the voice of SpongeBob, who credits the show's complex characters and simple plots for generating so many popular memes. From episode to episode, the residents of Bikini Bottom act goofy, anxious, or sad, but whatever their moods, it's clear creator Stephen Hillenburg started from a place of love, says Kenny.

The range of emotions makes for rich source material, and though platforms like Reddit, Instagram, and X can be used to spread negativity, meme-makers tend to give SpongeBob a special, kinder treatment. The SpongeBob memes tend to be "very relatable, but good-natured," says Kenny. "I just love that these people [meme-makers] are really funny," he says. "They think of things that I wouldn't think of."

The sheer number of SpongeBob memes is impressive. On Know Your Meme, the internet's primary database for all things meme-y, *SpongeBob SquarePants* memes currently account for over 22,000 images. To put that in context, other films and TV shows that supply meme fodder include the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which is only featured in 1,545 images, and *The Simpsons*, which has just over 7,000 images.

"Overall, if you look at our database, there are few other pop culture properties that are as frequently used in memes as SpongeBob," said Matt Schimkowitz, a former senior editor for Know Your Meme whose job entailed sifting through and organizing SpongeBob memes submitted by users, as well as defining and explaining the best SpongeBob memes. "You can compare him to things like *The Simpsons* or Shrek or the Marvel movies, and SpongeBob just has way more specific formats that have been repeated again and again."

In addition to the emotional nature of the characters, nostalgia for the past and the fact that the cartoon was made for children help fuel the impressive volume of SpongeBob memes, said Schimkowitz. "Pop cultural figures that become very meme-able have a lot to do with their ability to express specific emotions. And SpongeBob—and the characters on SpongeBob—are incredibly direct in what emotion they're trying to express," he said. "There's no real subtlety in terms of when SpongeBob is happy or when he is sad or when he is angry. He just is those things, which makes it much easier for people online to use them essentially as emojis and share them to express how they're feeling about a particular subject."

There is also the fact that SpongeBob is such a familiar face. "Everyone knows who he is, so it's incredibly easy to recognize where these memes are coming from," said Schimkowitz, observing that the happy sponge has become an "emoji" for Gen Z.

Read on for origin stories of some of the best SpongeBob memes, including Tom Kenny's favorite.

Mocking SpongeBob

It's hard to go one day without seeing Mocking SpongeBob (sometimes called the SpongeBob Chicken Meme) online. It's one of the simplest memes, as it requires no overlaid text and just plays off the character's exaggerated, critical face. (The image gets its alternate name from the fact that it is taken from the 2012 episode "Little Yellow Book," in which SpongeBob acts like a chicken.) Social media users will know that it is fairly common to see Mocking SpongeBob paired with repeating phrases with alternating capital letters—a form that Know Your Meme identifies as a "call and response" meme. This form originated in 2017 with a member of the Twitterati who used the handle @OGBEARD, according to the site. The first time @OGBEARD created a call and response meme, he posted the words "How I stare back at little kids when they stare for too long" with Mocking SpongeBob. For the record, Kenny says that Mocking SpongeBob is his favorite meme.

Tired SpongeBob

Taken from episode 8 of season 1, "Nature Pants," this meme shows SpongeBob sans shorts, tie, shirt, and underwear, as he's decided to leave his regular life and swim naked with the jellyfish.

People mostly use the meme when something exhausts, stresses, or takes the wind out of them; it tends to be accompanied by the widespread "me after [I do something]" construction (me after I come home from work; me after self-checkout in the grocery store; and so on).

Caveman SpongeBob (or Primitive SpongeBob)

Also called SpongeGar, this meme shows SpongeBob characterized as—you guessed it!—a caveman. It comes from an early 1999 episode, in which Patrick travels to prehistoric times, according to Know Your Meme. However, the actual SpongeGar character is a different sponge (one of SpongeBob's ancestors, who first appeared in the season 3 episode "Ugh," in 2004).

The Caveman SpongeBob meme, with the prehistoric sponge standing with his arms and legs spread out, can be used to describe an awkward, stressful, or uncomfortable situation or a moment when you may need to brace yourself. Often combined with the "when it's . . ." format of memes, the image of Primitive SpongeBob is typically layered on another background.

Squidward Looking Out the Window

In this meme, Squidward is frustrated with SpongeBob and Patrick and observes them with contempt as they play outside his home. The scene is from season 7's "That Sinking Feeling," in which, obligingly, the BFFs build a tunnel to stay out of Squidward's way and end up sinking his house.

The Squidward meme can be used to show what it's like to watch something that looks annoying or to watch something you're jealous and wistful of—the ideal meme for FOMO moments.

Savage Patrick (or Evil Patrick)

The Savage/Evil Patrick meme also comes from season 1's "Nature Pants," from a scene that follows what inspired Tired SpongeBob. It reflects a moment when Patrick, upset that SpongeBob wants to live with the jellyfish, becomes determined to bring his best friend back home, no matter what it takes.

Consider this the best SpongeBob meme to use when you want to seem savage or evil. It's really that simple.

Sleeping Squidward

Sleeping Squidward comes from a season 1 episode called "Home Sweet Pineapple," when Squidward awakes, realizing suddenly that SpongeBob and Gary are sleeping in bed with him.

The way Squidward's eyes blink wide reflects the feeling of suddenly remembering something. The first time the meme was used this way, it appeared with the words, "When you're about to go to sleep and you remember you have homework." This meme sometimes is posted with Squidward's eyes closed, but in either form, it should be used "when you remember something important in a flash of terrifying clarity," according to *Esquire* magazine.

Kenny likes Sleeping Squidward because it reveals darker layers that creator Stephen Hillenburg embedded in the show. "A lot of the memes are about anxiousness and anxiety, and *SpongeBob* has a lot of that hidden," Kenny says. But it's the lightheartedness that the show is made with that helps bring so much joy, too, the actor adds: "That's what makes us human, is the ability to laugh in the face of awfulness."

Sad SpongeBob in the Diner

In the opening moments of the season 3 episode "Missing Identity," SpongeBob sits at a diner alone. It's raining outside and, in a parody of film noir, he recounts a moment of existential crisis triggered by the loss of the name tag on his uniform. "I lost something once," he intones dramatically. ". . . I lost something I couldn't live without—my identity."

Since "Missing Identity" first aired, in 2002, Sad SpongeBob in the Diner has been deployed as a meme with captions that reflect minor but deeply felt losses. For example: "I lost something once . . . I lost the password to my old Twitter account." Though Sad SpongeBob expresses melancholy, the plotline in the show ends happily: SpongeBob realizes he has been wearing his uniform backward and that he has his name tag after all.

Confused Mr. Krabs

This meme began life in the episode "Patty Hype," in which SpongeBob quits the Krusty Krab and launches a rival restaurant, Pretty Patties. When Mr. Krabs sees what a big success the new place is, he negotiates to take it over. But as soon as he's in charge, angry customers arrive demanding refunds because of adverse affects of the patties—thus Mr. Krabs' confusion. The first (or one of the first) times the scene was used as a meme was on Twitter (now X) in 2016, when a user posted a screenshot, blurred, with the caption, "When you just wake up from a nap and your parents already yelling at you."

No, This Is Patrick

The No, This Is Patrick meme refers to a season 2 episode in which a caller to the Krusty Krab repeatedly asks, "Is this the Krusty Krab?" Patrick, who has recently been hired at the restaurant, does not understand that the potential customer just wants to know if they've dialed the right number. With each successive call, Patrick grows more agitated, angrily repeating the line, "No, this is Patrick!" The scene ends only when SpongeBob explains to his friend, "Uh, Patrick, that's the name of the restaurant."

No, This Is Patrick is an in-joke among superfans and useful in various situations. It most often is deployed to express annoyance or as a response to someone asking who you are, and back in 2019 came in handy on X to react to a viral tweet asking whether an animal was a bird or bunny. SpongeBob's X page got in on the joke, too, posting a video of actor Bill Fagerbakke—who voices Patrick—rerecording the scene in real life.

The Pride of Bikini Bottom

Just a few years after SpongeBob debuted, viewers began speculating about his sexuality. Why does it matter?

BY DAVID COLMAN

In one episode, SpongeBob talks about imagination; when he spreads his hands, a rainbow—a symbol of LGBTQ+ pride—forms.

IS HE, OR ISN'T HE?

When it comes to SpongeBob, that is the question. Or, for some viewers, it is at least one of the questions. Fans know where the lovable invertebrate works, lives, and who his friends are. They know he owns a skeleton and that he has firmly established that the principle of eternal hope and total denial are one and the same. But lingering out there in the Bikini Bottom-osphere, is the matter of SpongeBob's sexuality.

It's not the sort of issue that typically consumes the cartoon-watching demographic. (They usually just want to laugh.) Yet ever since the *Wall Street Journal* in 2002 pointed to enthusiasm among homosexual men for SpongeBob—"the biggest children's phenomenon to capture the imagination of gay men since the purple Teletubby named Tinky Winky started carrying a purse"—an animated cohort of fans have never stopped probing the matter. They point to perceived clues like SpongeBob's close relationship with his BFF, pink starfish Patrick Star; their now famous attempt to raise a baby scallop together; SpongeBob's worship of Lycra-clad superheroes Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy; and his near total lack of romantic interest in any female character. Will SpongeBob, these fans ask, ever come out of his pineapple?

To really answer this question one has to acknowledge its absurdity. First, SpongeBob is a sea sponge. Second of all, he's a child. Third of all, he's a cartoon child sponge. So what does "gay" even mean in this case?

The *Journal* article came out shortly after the season 3 episode "Rock-a-Bye Bivalve," which aired on September 17, 2002. (The *Journal* story ran on October 8). In the segment, SpongeBob and Patrick find an abandoned baby sea scallop and, taking pity on it, decide to raise it together. Patrick moves

into the famous pineapple and does the ’50s dad act, donning a coat and tie to go to an office job, while SpongeBob goes full-on mom, growing four more arms so he (or they?) can spend all day simultaneously rocking the baby, cleaning, vacuuming, ironing—and nursing a grudge against Patrick, who comes home late from work, and, instead of helping SpongeBob care for Junior, just plops down in front of the TV! Men: Am-I-rite?

Some SpongeBob fans interpreted “Rock-a-Bye Bivalve” as an absurdist take on a 1997 episode of *Friends*, in which Joey buys a baby chick and he and roommate Chandler instantly adopt 1950s mom and dad gender roles to adapt. Of course, it’s Chandler (an insecure character who people frequently assume is gay) who gets stuck playing Mom, even though he’s actually the one with the office job.

It wasn’t even just that episode. Just as Chandler is often the punch line of homosexual jokes, SpongeBob is forever challenging gender norms. In one cartoon, “MuscleBob BuffPants,” SpongeBob tries to buff up, but the weights on his barbells are just stuffed animals. To fast-track his progress, he buys inflatable muscle-arms and a Speedo and goes to the gym to flex. (To no avail: SpongeBob’s best girlfriend, Sandy the squirrel, signs him up for an

anchor-throwing competition, which he loses—to her.) In another episode, "No Weenies Allowed," the Sponge vows to get past the bouncer at Bikini Bottom's toughest bar, the Salty Spittoon, but can't even pass the test of opening a new bottle of ketchup. (Sandy, naturally, slams a roughneck patron to the ground and gets in easily.) And then, there's SpongeBob's famous invocation, "IMAGINATION," spelled out in the middle of a rainbow (a symbol of LGBTQ+ pride and diversity), which became a meme, a figurine, and everything in between.

Nickelodeon, home to *SpongeBob SquarePants* since 1999, reignited the "Is he or isn't he?" debate during Pride Month in June 2020 when the network included a picture of SpongeBob in an ambiguous tweet on X—"Celebrating #Pride with the LGBTQ+ community and their allies." Some fans interpreted the move as some kind of official coming-out for the absorbent and ebullient tyke. But was it, really? Well, yes, no, and maybe.

SpongeBob's behavior is reminiscent of 1920s silent-film star Buster Keaton, who haplessly but brilliantly mauled clichés of machismo.

To back up a beat: The only official word ever issued on the subject came from the show's creator, Stephen Hillenburg, in January of 2005, when conservative Christian groups were grumbling that *SpongeBob SquarePants* was promoting a "gay agenda." "It doesn't have anything to do with what we're trying to do," Hillenburg told Reuters at the time. "We never intended them to be gay. I consider them to be almost asexual."

Hillenburg would know all about sponges and sexual reproduction. Before getting a graduate degree from CalArts in animation in the early 1990s, he studied marine biology as an undergraduate in the 1980s. In between his two degrees, Hillenburg's interest in animation was stoked when he was teaching marine biology to grade schoolers and came up with his own comic strips to make tide pools more interesting to students. So, while the animator might have glossed over the fact that real sea sponges are not technically asexual when he was instructing youngsters, he would have been well aware that they are known as "sequentially hermaphroditic," alternating between male and female. As the creator of SpongeBob, he also would have known that the most defining aspect of SpongeBob's personality is the fact that he is a kid. He's prepubescent, presexual, and the very epitome of what Freud called "polymorphously perverse"—that is, he takes hilarious, childlike pleasure in every cartoonish aspect of his extremely elastic physiology. (As the sponge dryly points out in one episode, his face is also his body.)

It's interesting: What *SpongeBob* does is tackle all the connotations of *gay* that boys sometimes use to taunt other boys on the playground for all kinds of behavior—none of which involves sexuality. This is a very different realm, in which *gay* has for decades been a vague and damning all-purpose synonym for "uncool." Getting too emotional about something. Being too neat in your clothes. Participating too actively in class. Singing along to pop songs. Dropping your tray in the cafeteria. Or doing anything too childish. All against the unwritten seventh-grade cool code—a code which has recently been exhumed, poked, and prodded by lewd, bro-lific comedy podcasters like Shane Gillis and Adam Friedland.

Pretty much everything SpongeBob ever does is antithetical to the seventh-grade cool code, so by these standards he's as gay as *Cats*. But given the virtuosity with which he does it and the popularity he's racked up doing it, you could argue that he deserves the positive definition of *queer* more than the playground insult of *gay*. (Moreover, it's the character of Squidward, the cranky confirmed bachelor next door, who's more classically coded as gay; and the only plausible gay couple on *SpongeBob SquarePants* is the comically elderly Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy, former superheroes who live and bicker together in a retirement home. But even their relationship remains open to interpretation.) Meanwhile, for SpongeBob, there isn't a single social norm, adult or adolescent, that he doesn't flout at one time or another.

Still, part of what makes the character so endearing is his blithe sincerity. Forever gullible to any

Many cartoon characters have blurred sexuality and gender, including, clockwise from left, Bugs Bunny, the pink puma Snagglepuss, and Stewie of Family Guy.

attractive con job, SpongeBob wears his trademark square pants as a silly but earnest tribute to the rigid box of manhood, then tramples the trope with his panicky shenanigans. His behavior is reminiscent of silent star Buster Keaton, who brilliantly mauled clichés of machismo in the 1920s, and of how Lucille Ball always managed to mangle the feminine corsetry of the 1950s, and of how Pee-wee Herman thumbed his nose at all adulthood in the 1980s.

The most surreal aspect of the curiosity about SpongeBob's sexuality isn't that he's a sponge or a kid; it's that he's a cartoon character. Cartoons—the most literally elastic characters that entertainment can produce—have always loved to blur sexuality and gender. Look at the arch sarcasm of Bugs Bunny, Wally Gator, and Snagglepuss in the 1950s and 1960s; the questionable beefcake of archenemies He-Man and Skeletor in the 1980s; the snide villainy of every 1990s Disney-movie villain; the Brit-inflected hauteur of Stewie from *Family Guy*; and the ever-switching gender expressions of Roger, the alien from *American Dad!* complete with costume changes, wigs, and makeup. And so many more.

All told, it's quite a rogue's gallery, making you wonder if, in their super-elastic-bubble-plastic personas, totally nonhuman characters like SpongeBob are the most human of all. Sure, you can argue that it's expansive thinking to see him as part of the LGBTQ+ universe, but maybe even that is thinking too small. You could just as easily say, for example, that SpongeBob has ADHD as call him gay.

Look at it this way: In French, the word for gender is a word we already know well—*genre*. Really, SpongeBob's identity isn't just about gender (which can get so binary), it's about genre—of personality, neurodivergence, aesthetic, species, play pattern, energy, developmental stage, or, like, vibe.

As with so many of us in real life, his absorbent little self contains multitudes. Maybe it takes a sponge to break the mold.

Bikini Bottomers Ride the Retail Wave

SpongeBob wows not just on the small screen and under the sea, but on the store shelf. Pineapple Olipop, anyone?

By Eileen Daspin

AS CORPORATE TWEETS GO, IT didn't seem that earth-shattering. On March 21, 2019, food giant Kraft announced the end of a licensing deal: "Unfortunately," read the message, "the Sponge Bob Kraft Macaroni & Cheese has been discontinued. Sorry for any disappointment this may cause!"

For SpongeBob foodies, disappointment didn't cover the half of it. Thousands took to social media to vent their anger. Others wrote the company CEO. There were multiple change.org petitions demanding the product's return, and even two years later mac and cheese eaters continued to complain on Twitter, (now X).

Finally, in 2023, the pressure campaign produced results, with Kraft announcing it was bringing back the cheesy pasta, posting on X, "It's time to give the people what they want."

Opposite from top: At London's Toy Fair; Kraft mac 'n' cheese. Above, clockwise from top left: Lighting up Sphere in Las Vegas for a Crocs promotion; doggie dress-up; figurines at a store in Indonesia.

Devoted followings of cartoon characters go with the territory. Each year, fans of Mickey Mouse, Disney princesses, Elsa, Spiderman, Winnie the Pooh, Pokéman, and others spend close to $150 billion on their respective favorites, a figure that continues to grow. Some of that cash outlay—part of the past decade's IP bonanza for entertainment companies—reflects smart marketing. It also is linked to the expanding digital universe, growth in international franchises, and the push to extend brand.

For SpongeBob and his parent network, Nickelodeon, the revenue is generated by your standard selection of mugs, T-shirts, and figurines, as well as burping plush dolls, Pop-Tarts, a pineapple-flavored Olipop prebiotic soda, and high-fashion collabs with designers including Pharrell Williams and Jeremy Scott of Moschino. There is a SpongeBob dark ride in Las Vegas, and the city's famous Sphere has been used as a billboard to advertise SpongeBob Crocs; there's a race car branded with SpongeBob's face in Australia and a version of the board game Operation where players remove bits and bobs from the character's torso. As of 2024, the 25th anniversary of the *SpongeBob SquarePants* series, related retail sales have accounted for some $16 billion. With that kind of coin floating around, "the pineapple under the sea," observed *Forbes* in 2024, "should be a penthouse by now."

There have been some duds—in 2023, fans took to social media to complain about malformed SpongeBob Popsicles that leaked—but amid a sea of hits, a few misses are only to be expected. Plus, most of the weirdest merchandise is unauthorized knockoffs over which Nickelodeon has no quality control—though their lawyers do their best, like in 2021 when Paramount Global, the owner of Nickelodeon, sued a Houston pop-up bar, the Rusty Krab, for copyright infringement in 2021, winning $6 million in damages from the bar's owner.

For a company like Paramount, with a nearly $10 billion market capitalization, a $6 million judgment is a drop in the chum bucket, but the settlement underscores the huge IP value of SpongeBob's pineapple under the sea—a property that is for legit available to rent as part of the Nickelodeon Hotels and Resorts collection in the Dominican Republic. It's a 1,500-square-foot villa, with an infinity pool and private gardens, and it goes for roughly $5,000 a night.

Dazzling Broadway

The unlikely pairing of an avant-garde stage director and Nickelodeon's favorite talking sponge resulted in a musical that was as goofy, energetic, and creative as the original TV show.

BY EILEEN DASPIN

STAGE DIRECTOR TINA LANDAU'S reaction to the offer was reflexive. Invited by Nickelodeon in 2007 to pitch ideas for a Broadway-bound musical featuring SpongeBob, the theater vet and avant-garde darling barely blinked before giving her answer: Thanks, and no thanks.

Nickelodeon circled back. The project, execs said, was not intended to just squeeze cash out of SpongeBob, but to express his original "indie" persona. On her agent's advice, Landau reconsidered, watched the show . . . and was in. It was "so frigging surreal and wacky and full of non sequiturs and upside-down logic," the director told *The Interval*. ""It was instantly screaming, *for me*, to put it on stage."

As it turned out, the talking sponge and the theater geek were kindred spirits. A wannabe oceanographer when she was young, Landau began channeling her early interest in the deep to transport Bikini Bottom from the small screen to the Great White Way. She took her "indie" marching orders to heart, reimagining SpongeBob as a logic-challenging mash-up of genres: part *Gazillion Bubble Show*, part *Blue Man Group*, part Pina Bausch. Her songbook was equally eccentric—David Bowie, the Flaming Lips, Cyndi Lauper, and Panic! At the Disco all con-

In his Broadway debut, Ethan Slater, cast when he was a college sophomore, won over audiences as SpongeBob.

Patrick (Danny Skinner) and SpongeBob (Slater) celebrate their friendship in the song "BFF," written by Tom Higgenson of the Plain White T's.

tributed numbers—with stage props fashioned from sea-themed discards. And while slow progress frustrated Landau—it was three years before the first workshop and a decade before opening night—she was gratified by the process. "I was like, 'Wow, I'm just really going balls to the wall here,'" Landau told *The Interval*. "I just decided that's what it needed to be. I needed to try everything."

When *SpongeBob: The Musical* finally premiered at the Palace Theatre in December 2017, the result was remarkable. Ticket holders entering the auditorium encountered waterfalls made of tinsel spilling off the walls; hanging sculptures made of Solo cups and pool noodles; beach-ball-size globes framing the top of the stage and stacks of vintage boom boxes lining the proscenium. Arcing over everything were two Rube Goldberg machines that spit out orange bouncy balls. On stage, there were dancing jellyfish, a school of sardines belting out the gospel-tinged "Super Sea Star Savior," a four-legged Squidward hoofing it, Ziegfeld Follies–style, and most notably, an elastic-limbed Ethan Slater as SpongeBob. "For what it's worth—and we're talking millions of dollars here—you are never going to see as convincing an impersonation of a two-dimensional cartoon by a three-dimensional human as that provided by Ethan Slater at the Palace Theatre," wrote the *New York Times*.

To be sure, the razzle-dazzle only went so far. While reviewers raved about the musical's goofy creativity, they almost all noted that you had to be a big *SpongeBob* fan to really enjoy the production, and that the plot—about SpongeBob and friends saving Bikini Bottom from the eruption of Mount Humongous—was thin. Ticket sales were relatively soft and the show closed after 10 months, failing to earn back its $18 million-plus capitalization. (Official word was the Palace had to close for renovations.) Meanwhile, Tony voters voiced their admiration-cum-reservations by nominating the musical for a dozen awards and sending it home with only one. During the final curtain call in September 2018, Landau subtly acknowledged the disappointing reception—"Everything beautiful is impermanent"—adding that she could not have been prouder of the show's accomplishment. "We fought skepticism and sometimes ridicule to show that art comes in all forms."

THERE WERE DOUBTS ABOUT THE VIABILITY of a SpongeBob musical from almost the beginning. For all its reassurances to Landau, Nickelodeon did not want to jeopardize the reputation of its $5 billion retail cash cow; some inside the entertainment company were hesitant, including president Cyma Zarghami, who worried the show would look like a "skip and wave," the industry term for a kiddie friendly, low-production-value musical event. Approached to write the book (and ultimately hired), Kyle Jarrow was uncertain that a cartoon that ran 11 minutes an episode could fill a two-and-a-half hour musical, while superfans wrung their virtual hands on social media. ("I wanted to facepalm," wrote one SpongeBob devotee on Reddit of their original reaction.)

In fact, cartoon characters have long struggled to find their footing on the Broadway stage. In 1956, *Li'l Abner*, from the newspaper comic strip, was a big success, while a decade later the superhero musical *It's a Bird . . . It's a Plane . . . It's Superman!* ran for only 126 performances, in spite of a delightful score and multiple Tony nominations. The following year, *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, from the beloved Peanuts comic strip, impressed off Broadway, but when the show moved to Broadway in 1971, it lasted only 32 regular performances.

The rocky trajectory seemed to reset with *Annie*, about the spirited redheaded orphan taken in by a billionaire, which opened in 1976 and went on to become one of the biggest hits of the '80s. Other cartoon-inspired productions were mounted, some of which did better than others. (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* closed after a month, while *Beauty and the Beast* ran for 13 years.) But the mega success of *The Lion King*, which opened in 1997, rekindled the genre. The Disney film–inspired show, a collaboration between edgy director Julie Taymor and Disney, not only proved the commercial value of vision and innovation—the animals were astonishing, life-size puppets—it helped revive a then crumbling, drug-ridden Times Square, paved the way for the Broadway blockbuster, and went on to gross some $10 billion.

For all its reassurances to Landau, Nickelodeon did not want to jeopardize the reputation of its $5 billion retail cash cow with a Broadway flop.

Fittingly, when Zarghami was approached about the concept and allowed her staff to pursue the idea of a Broadway musical, she had the Disney phenomenon in mind. "I gave the assignment: If you can find somebody who can translate it in the most clever way possible, so that people are in awe of it, in the way they were originally in awe of *The Lion King*, then I'm all in," Zarghami told the *New York Times*.

Once Landau was on board, the director knew her challenge was to make the cartoon characters of *SpongeBob* as relatable and human as possible. There would be no actors in giant mascot heads, and no puppetry at all. Instead, set and costume designer David Zinn came up with outfits that were more clever than outright splashy. Slater, as SpongeBob, wore a checked yellow shirt, plaid pants, a tie, and suspenders; Patrick was dressed as a stoner surfer guy (with a crocheted cape); and Brian Ray Norris was transformed into Mr. Krabs with a pair of oversized boxing gloves to represent claws. The closest thing to a prosthetic on stage was the extra pair of legs sewn into Squidward's costume, to give actor Gavin Lee a more octopus-like appearance.

When it came to the set, Landau and Zinn leaned into the idea of an immersive experience, so that the audience felt it was entering a world that felt "part underwater, part carnival, part party, part junkyard," Landau told *The Interval*. The two gravitated to found objects, neon, and a Hobby Lobby warehouse's worth of feathers and sequins.

After closing, *SpongeBob: The Musical* did not just go quietly into the night. In 2019, Nickelodeon revived it as a live broadcast event, and there have been multiple local productions around the country. More than anywhere, the show lives on online, among fans who sing its praises. The same Reddit user who wanted to "facepalm" when the show was first announced, admitted to being a fan. "It went over and beyond what I was expecting. I love how they were able to make the characters not cartoonish but still true to the cartoons. And it was just such fun."

SpongeBob at the Movies

When Bikini Bottom moved to the big screen, stars like David Hasselhoff, Antonio Banderas, and Mark Hamill jumped aboard for the silliness.

BY RICH SANDS

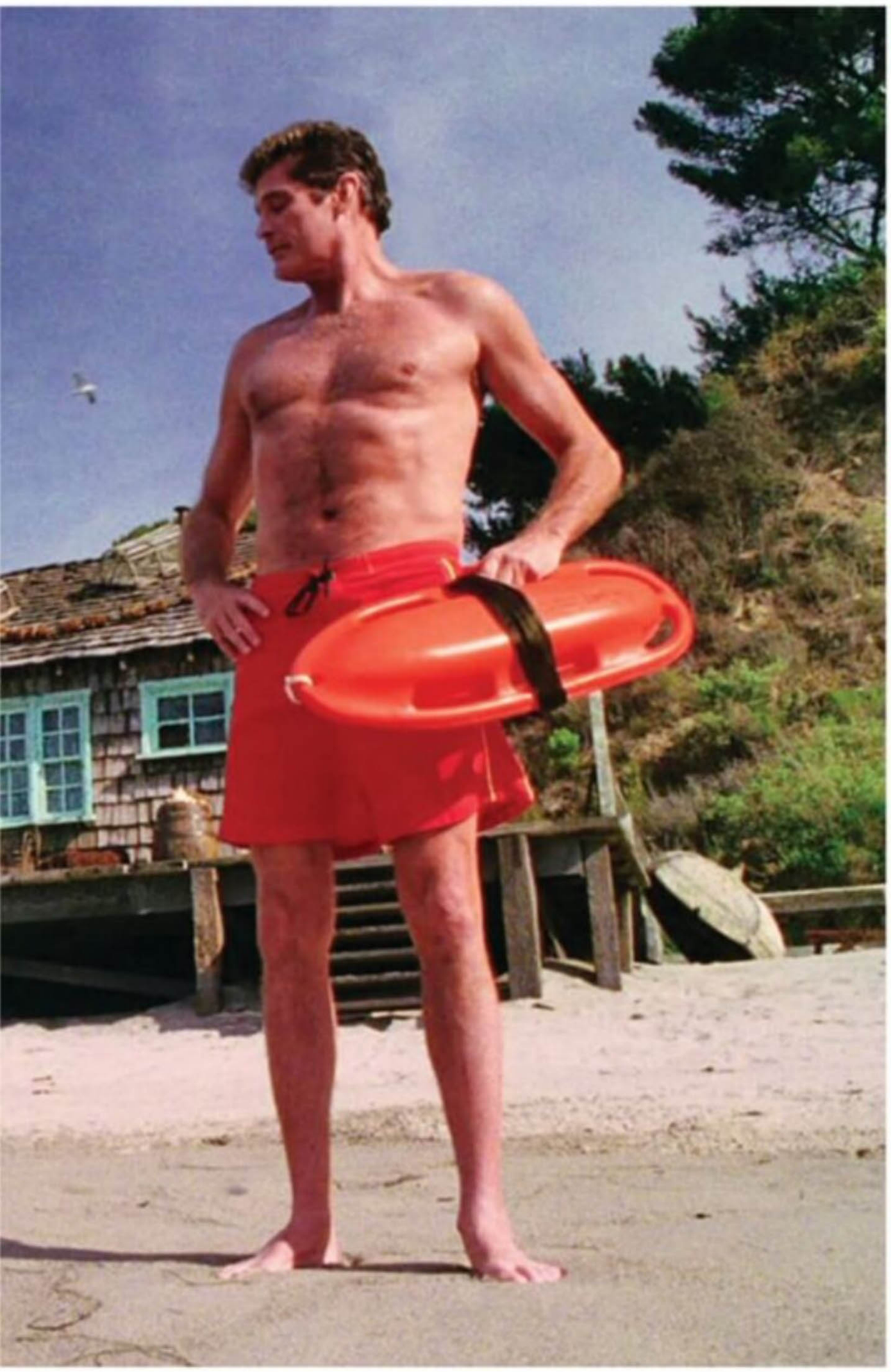
In The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie, *David Hasselhoff plays himself, and SpongeBob and Patrick try to help Mr. Krabs.*

DAVID HASSELHOFF HAD NEVER heard of *SpongeBob SquarePants* when he was asked to play himself in the Nickelodeon cartoon's first feature film adaptation. But the *Baywatch* star quickly learned about the series from his daughters, and he enthusiastically signed on for *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*.

"It was great fun and to this day around the world kids stop me and say, 'Are you David Hasselhoff?' because I was the only human in the picture," the actor said in 2011. "It's amazing. So many of the kids were so young and didn't see *Baywatch* and *Knight Rider*, so I got a whole new legion of fans."

Hasselhoff's live-action appearance—helping SpongeBob and his buddy Patrick return to Bikini Bottom at their end of their mission—was one of many big swings the filmmakers took as they crafted an elaborate quest for the characters. The 2004 film's plot felt more ambitious than a traditional episode of the series, while remaining faithful to the show's core optimism and goofiness. "The first movie performed above expectations," says Tom Kenny, the voice of SpongeBob. "It was really funny, and a great widening out of the SpongeBob world, translated to the big screen but still with all the banal, stupid stuff intact."

Things could have easily gone in a different direction, as moving a hit series like *SpongeBob SquarePants* to the big screen from the small one can present challenges. On a purely logistical level, there are the complications of juggling feature-film making with keeping on top of the demands of a hit show. Adapting the high-octane pace of an 11-minute *SpongeBob* episode to an hour and a half long film can be difficult for writers and producers, as is meeting the expectations of fans who are wildly



loyal to SpongeBob. In fact, creator Stephen Hillenburg initially was resistant to the idea of making a feature, believing that SpongeBob's adventures were best suited to the short bursts of the on-air segments of the series.

But by coming up with the right story, an adventure that took SpongeBob and Patrick in an unexpected direction, Hillenburg and his *SpongeBob* colleagues found a formula that worked. "This had to be SpongeBob in a great adventure," Hillenburg told the *New York Times* when the film opened, in 2004. "That's where the comedy's coming from, having these two naive characters, SpongeBob and Patrick, a doofus and an idiot, on this incredibly dangerous heroic odyssey with all the odds against them."

The plot involved Plankton's latest attempt to learn the formula for Krabby Patties, the signature item at Mr. Krabs' Krusty Krab restaurant. As part of his elaborate "Plan Z," Plankton steals the crown of the vain King Neptune and frames the heist on Mr. Krabs, which leads to the Krusty Krab's going out of business. The King's wrath inspires SpongeBob and Patrick to embark on an adventure to gritty Shell City to retrieve the crown and clear Mr. Krabs' name.

The King was voiced by *Arrested Development*

Q&A: The Voice of Evil

Mark Hamill, Star Wars' idealistic Luke Skywalker, these days gravitates toward playing villains, like the Flying Dutchman in *The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants*.

BY EMMA MURPHY

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN, A GHOSTLY pirate who haunts Bikini Bottom, can levitate, teleport, and even turn people into phantasms. Who better than Mark Hamill to bring the green sadist to life in *Search for SquarePants*? The actor has not only voiced some of animation's biggest villains—the Joker in multiple Batman properties, Fire Lord Ozai in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and the evil government agent Muska in Hayao Miyazaki's *Castle in the Sky*—he says he is a child at heart. Hamill spoke to TIME about the role, its origins, and Krabby Patties. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

TIME Do you remember how you were first introduced to SpongeBob?

MARK HAMILL Even before I had kids, I always loved children's television. That's one thing about getting older. You wonder, When will I stop liking squirt guns or blowing bubbles? But your sensibilities don't get old. We watched *SpongeBob* with the kids, and as I got older we sort of moved on. But I never stopped loving it.

When they asked me to be the voice of the Flying Dutchman I immediately accepted. But I thought, I better do my homework. So I went to the computer and I realized I had played a role [the Moth] in *SpongeBob SquarePants* in, like, 2004.

As a SpongeBob fan, do you have a favorite character?

Oh, that's really hard. But there would be no SpongeBob without Tom Kenny. He just embodies the character and I've known him for 30 years or something.

If you had to play either only nice guys or villains, which would you pick?

I like 'em both. I'd hate to have to stick to one or the other, but I'll tell you, being a bad guy is a whole lot of fun. I'm really pleased to be a villain against someone

star Jeffrey Tambor, one of several celebrities recruited for the film. Also on board were Scarlett Johansson as the King's daughter, Mindy, and Alec Baldwin as Dennis, a hit man hired by Plankton to thwart SpongeBob and Patrick. Most famously, Hasselhoff played himself in a live-action sequence, for which a 13-foot replica of the actor in his signature Baywatch red swimming trunks was built to help film the scene in which the animated characters ride on his back like a speedboat.

Ultimately, the 87-minute experiment, directed by Hillenburg, proved successful, with mostly positive reviews. "The film's appeal, along with what you might call its moral, lies in the close fit between Mr. Hillenburg's brightly colored, daftly inventive approach to animation and storytelling and the buoyant, grating good cheer of his hero," wrote *New York Times* critic A.O. Scott. "In the course of

Tom Kenny, the voice of SpongeBob, and Hamill at a 2024 San Diego Comic-Con panel (left); Hamill's character, the Flying Dutchman, in Search for SquarePants.

as purehearted and sweet and adorable and loving as SpongeBob. Oh my gosh, if I do my job correctly, every kid in America will hate my guts, because it is fun to boo the villain, you know?

In the past the Flying Dutchman was voiced by Brian Doyle-Murray. Did you take any inspiration from his performances?

When they offered me the part I thought the Flying Dutchman was a new character for the film. When I did my homework, I said, Holy moly, this guy's been around for a long time. But I think it was one of those things where Brian Doyle-Murray was unavailable, but he's one of my favorite actors.

I can't do Brian Doyle-Murray, but come on. To be the Flying Dutchman you gotta be a pirate. And it's all in the script, really. The character is ludicrous, not frightening, but the good kind of scary. Kids love the light scare.

How do you portray a villain who walks the line between being evil but also silly in a very SpongeBob way?

You know, if it ain't on the page, it ain't on the stage. I mean, there were moments of ad-libbing, but for the most part, the writing was perfect.

Are there any funny moments that stick out to you from recording this movie?

I love the fact that Tom Kenny is so involved in the making of this movie. He's effortlessly funny. When you wake up in the morning and go, What am I doing today? Oh, we're doing SpongeBob. It's really exciting.

In the past some fans have criticized the SpongeBob movies, but it seems like you think this movie's gonna be pretty good.

You can't please everyone, obviously. I love the title, *The SpongeBob Movie: Search For Square Pants,* because it takes on a feeling of importance, which of course it doesn't have. It's an example of the humor of SpongeBob. The filmmakers don't take themselves way too seriously.

What do you think a Krabby Patty tastes like?

Well, if it tastes like crab, it's probably pretty good.

his journey, SpongeBob tries on several occasions to prove his manhood, and in each case succeeds in proving the opposite."

The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie finished second at the box office on its opening weekend (behind the Nicolas Cage adventure *National Treasure*) and became a cult favorite, though it came in 31st for the year for domestic box office, at $85 million. In part because it was stressful for some crew members to juggle show- and feature-making responsibilities, it was more than a decade before Nickelodeon's parent company, Paramount, decided to pursue a second SpongeBob film—this time as part of the company's larger push into animation. By then Hillenburg had stepped down as the showrunner for the series, so his replacement, Paul Tibbitt, was tapped to direct 2015's *The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge Out of Water*. Antonio Banderas was brought in as the sequel's

In the 2020 film Sponge on the Run, *SpongeBob, Patrick, and friends head out to rescue Gary, who is being held captive in the Lost City of Atlantic City.*

celebrity guest star, playing Burger Beard, a live-action pirate who steals the formula for Krabby Patties through magic so he can set up his own food truck. The residents of Bikini Bottom, denied their favorite fast food, revolt, and to quell the chaos SpongeBob and his pals embark on a quest to reclaim the recipe. The film opened No. 1 at the box office and went on to earn a franchise-high $325 million.

The third chapter in the SpongeBob cinematic universe, *The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge on the Run*, released during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, was CGI animated and featured Keanu Reeves in the live-action celebrity role. The *Matrix* star played Sage, a sentient tumbleweed who serves as a spirit guide to SpongeBob and Patrick as they attempt to save SpongeBob's beloved pet snail, Gary, who has been kidnapped by Plankton as part of his latest ploy to gain the Krabby Patty formula.

Also making cameos were Snoop Dogg as the Gambler, a character who is seen singing with flesh-eating cowboy pirate zombies; Danny Trejo as El Diablo, the leader of said flesh-eating cowboy pirate zombies; and Awkwafina as Otto, a robot boat pilot who drives SpongeBob and Patrick to the Atlantic to rescue Gary. The film had a limited theatrical distribution but was streamed on Paramount+ and again earned mostly praise. "The movie is an act of loony generosity we shouldn't refuse. This is ludicrous entertainment for frazzled times," wrote TIME critic Stephanie Zacharek. "You will not come away having learned much of anything from *Sponge on the Run* beyond the fact that being a true friend is important—which, come to think of it, is a pretty big thing."

Since then, a pair of spin-off films focusing on other characters have been released exclusively on Netflix. First up, in 2024, was *Saving Bikini Bottom: The Sandy Cheeks Movie*, which introduces the family of the show's plucky squirrel scientist. Along with SpongeBob, they battle a ruthless businesswoman (played in live-action by Wanda Sykes) who extracts Bikini Bottom from the ocean as part of a plot to create pet versions of the inhabitants. *Plankton: The Movie*, released in 2025, explored the backstory of Plankton's sentient computer wife, Karen, as she goes on a quest for world domination.

The next theatrical outing, *The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants*, is set to open in December 2025. Derek Drymon, the show's original creative director, who worked closely with Hillenburg on the shaping of Bikini Bottom, has returned

Q&A: The Fangirl

Rapper Ice Spice, who grew up watching *SpongeBob*, recorded a catchy track for *Search for SquarePants*.

BY EMMA MURPHY

ICE SPICE IS KNOWN AS A SPONGEBOB fan—one of her earliest hits was "Bikini Bottom," inspired by the show—but the rapper's lyrics and style might seem a little edgy for a track in *The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePant*s. "It was a bit of a challenge," says the singer, "but it was a fun one." Listen for the song "Big Guy," and for her cameo in the film as an amusement-park ticket taker, her debut as a voice actor. Here, Ice chats about her favorite characters, auditioning for the film, and her songwriting process. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

TIME I read that you had a crush on SpongeBob as a kid.
ICE SPICE He is the funniest person ever. And I love how yellow he is—it's one of my favorite colors. Also, he's so nostalgic for me, because I grew up watching him, and me and my friends bonded over SpongeBob jokes, memes, and references.

Were there any other characters that appealed (or didn't appeal) to you?
I never really liked Sandy because I felt she was so aggressive sometimes. She always wanted to outshine the boys in an annoying way. I'm like, Damn, girl, where are your female friends?

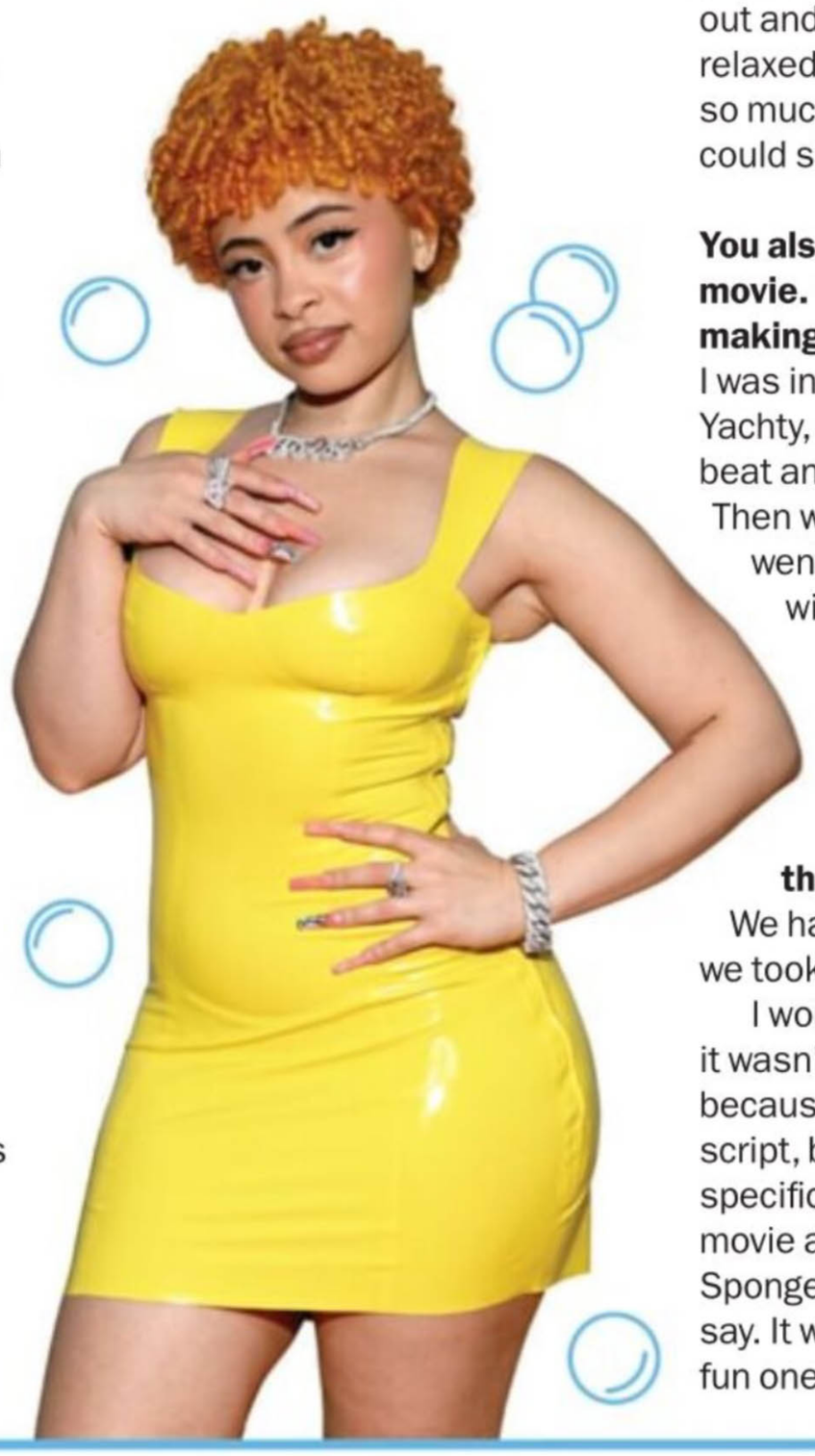
Gary, I like him because he's quiet. I love a quiet person, especially a quiet man.

I love Mr. Krabs. I feel like Mr. Krabs resonates with me the most, because he's a boss, and he's very into his savings.

The best for last: Squidward. He is lovable, and he actually wants to be around people but he has a hard time expressing it.

Your favorite episode is "Rock Bottom"?
The episode is so dark . . . It wasn't until I got older that I started to realize what it was trying to convey: The title is "Rock Bottom." When you are at rock bottom, you just keep trying, and then, like, eventually you'll get back to Bikini Bottom.

How did the casting process work?
It went through management and once the offer came across my desk, I was like, yes—I don't even think I asked for the details. Anything SpongeBob. I'm down.



Tell me about your character.
She has my signature ginger Afro and a very laid-backish vibe until she gets annoyed. She's kind of like your average ticket booth person. [The character works at an amusement park ride.] She reminds me of myself when I was working in fast food. The way I was yelling, "Next!"

What was it like to transition to voice acting for this movie?
I think voice acting is really fun because you're not so concerned about how you look. So you're able to kind of make funny faces when you're trying to get a certain sound out and stuff like that. It's way more relaxed because as a girl you care so much about how you look and you could slouch a little or whatever.

You also wrote a song for the movie. What was the process of making the song like?
I was in the studio with Riot and Lil Yachty, and Riot started playing this beat and it sounded so SpongeBob. Then we finished an entire song, went back in and chopped it up with some SpongeBob vocab.

Some of your songs have explicit lyrics, not exactly for kids. Did you have to do some self-censoring for this track?
We had some curses first and then we took them out.

I would be lying to you if I said it wasn't a little bit of a challenge, because we had to stick to the script, because it's about a very specific character in a very specific movie and there are certain SpongeBob-related words we had to say. It was a challenge, but it was a fun one.

Patrick blows bubbles—one of his favorite activities—at SpongeBob on board the Ship Dutchman in 2025's Search for SquarePants.

to the fold to direct. In this installment, the Flying Dutchman is the central villain. An on-again, off-again antagonist in the series, here he uses the gullible SpongeBob as an unwitting pawn in his plan to end the curse that made him a ghost. "He's a fun villain. He's got a little weight to him. We thought about the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies a lot while working on this," says Matt Lieberman, one of the screenwriters. "He represents a classic pirate and he has big personal stakes, the perfect character to get unwound by somebody like SpongeBob."

Much of the movie is set in a new location. "We are taking SpongeBob to a world we have not seen before. We thought, [*Black Panther*'s] Wakanda was a cool world. How do we get SpongeBob into our equivalent of Wakanda?" says screenwriter Pam Brady, who previously helped adapt *South Park* into the 1999 hit *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*. "It's got pirates and ghosts. The fun is just to see SpongeBob and Patrick go into this pirate-y Flying Dutchman world."

In the series the Flying Dutchman is voiced by Brian Doyle-Murray, but here he'll be voiced by Star Wars vet Mark Hamill. "He was thrilled to be doing stuff that's just big and stupid," says Kenny, who in addition to playing SpongeBob also serves as the franchise's voice director. "It's a cartoon! He gets to be a big villain like Margaret Hamilton as the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*. You can be that big. He was really leaning into that."

Also joining the cast are rapper Ice Spice (contributing a song to the soundtrack in addition to a cameo role), George Lopez, and Regina Hall.

One thing moviegoers should not expect to see is any grandiose sense of strict continuity connecting the film with past installments or the TV show. "The great thing about SpongeBob is that there's not this canon like Marvel movies with 50 movies that fit together and then there's a TV series in between the cracks of this five-minute sequence in one of the movies," Kenny says with a laugh.

As over the top as *Search for SquarePants* promises to be, like the previous movies, filmmakers sought to tap into the more human emotions of the characters (even if they aren't human). "We really wanted to make sure that we were making a giant SpongeBob movie that people would want to go to the theaters to see," says Brady. "It all comes down to the characters. You have to start small and it has to be a true, grounded thing. Then you can go insane."

TIME

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SpongeBob SquarePants

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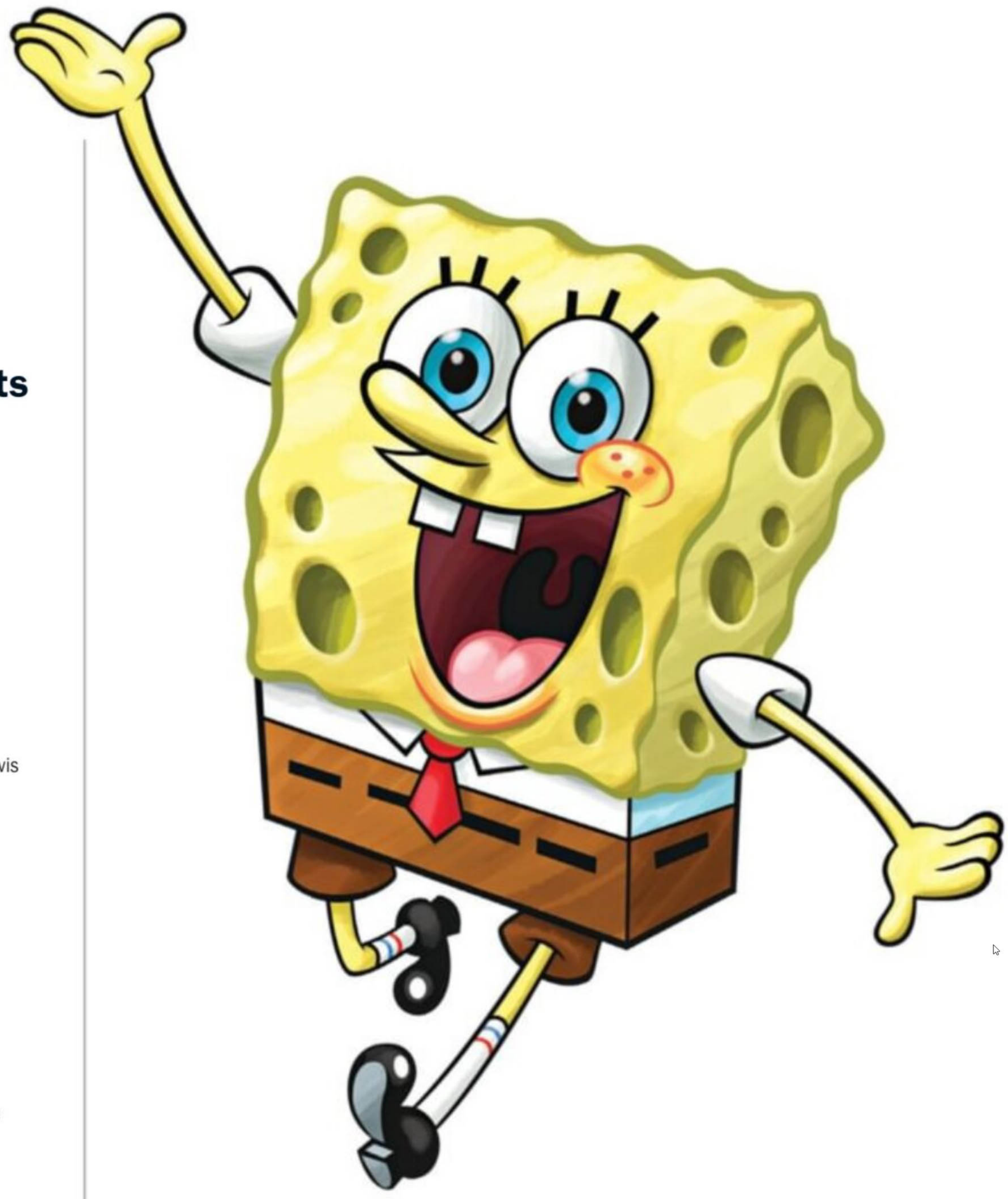

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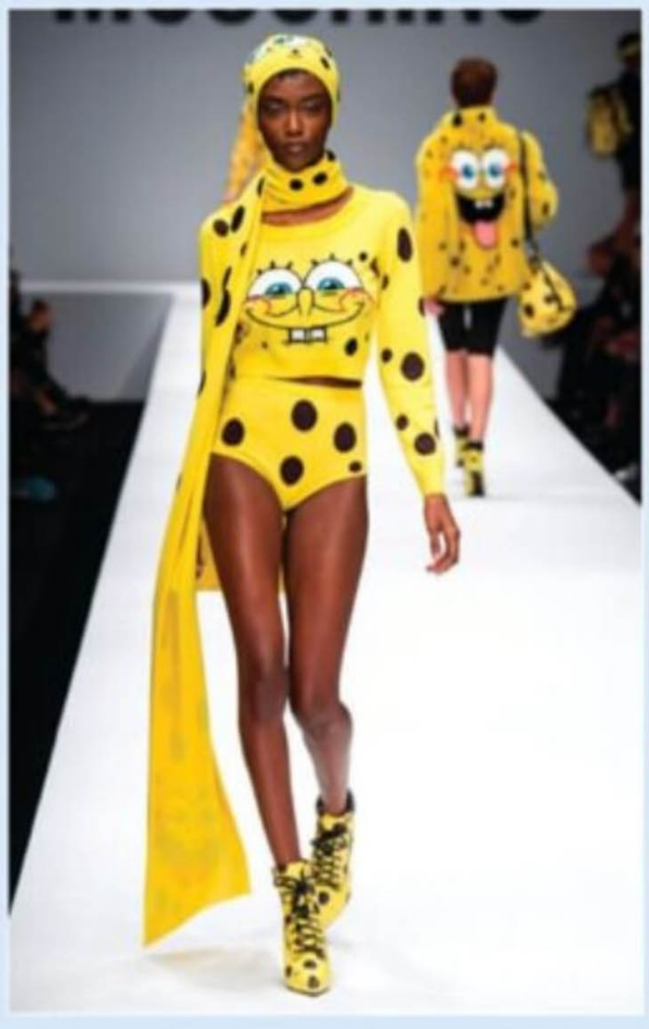
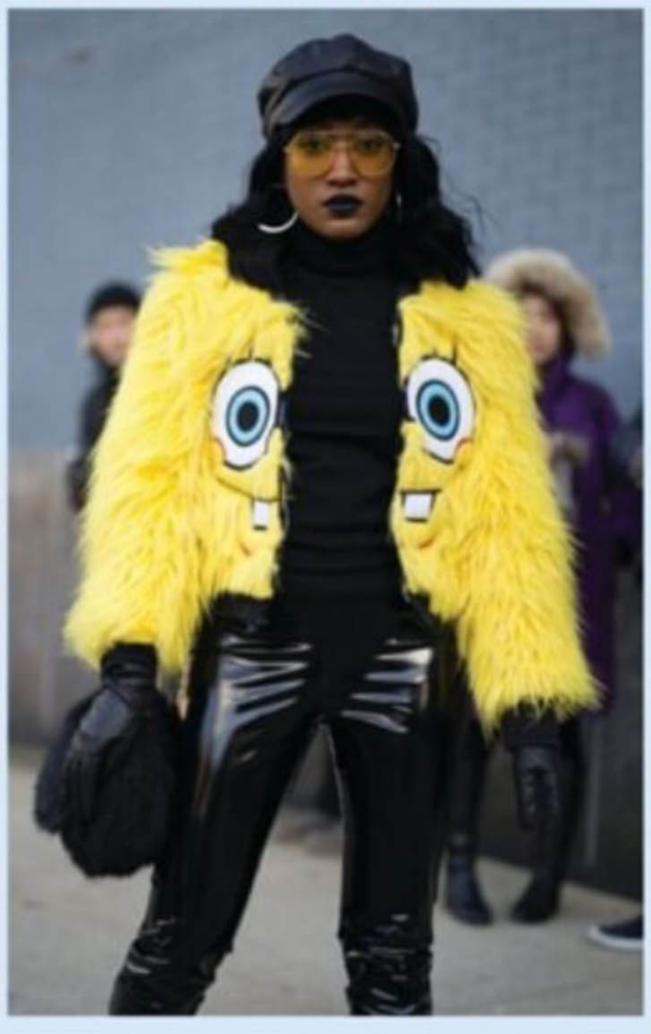
High-Fashion Muse

From the runway to the red carpet, SpongeBob-loving designers have dressed their models in Bikini Bottom-wear.





Clockwise from top: Marlou Breuls' 2019 collection was inspired by SpongeBob; a 2018 Tony Awards guest toted a SpongeBob evening bag; New York Fashion Week, February 2018; the Moschino show, Milan, 2014.

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